Estrella Distante

By Roberto Bolano

I. La Mara

La Mara is in the balcony and seeing the stars. She is astronomy to Earth and is also then the meaning of the Earth she says to Ayamara.

II. Aero Puerto

The book is narrated from a distance by Arturo B. (probably Arturo Belano) and tells the story of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, an aviator who exploits the 1973 Chilean coup d'état to launch his own version of the New Chilean Poetry: a multi-media enterprise involving sky-writing, photography and verse; In fact then Arturo says about the development of Alberto Ruiz who then is in fact a poet who works in Chiapas. And there in fact he saw the aeroplane fly past him and this becomes a point in history which articulates to

Allende’s failure by what Belano calls a space conjecture. He means then that in fact Allende was killed by Pinochet by a man called Ruiz.

III. Tlon

Ruiz-Tagle in a college poetry workshop led by Juan Stein, where Ruiz-Tagle presents himself as a well-dressed, financially secure, self-taught writer with an unnaturally cool, distant, and calculated demeanor — in sharp contrast to the economically poor, messy, leftist, activist tendencies of the narrator (and most other poetry fans then enrolled at the University of Concepcion). Ruiz-Tagle also shows a surprising detachment from his own work, giving measured, intelligent criticism and receiving it without flinching.

Tagle is speaking all night to Juan and is also speaking to him of Jorge Luis Borges’ genius in producing a space-conjecture. In the future of Lorca there is this.

IV. Time and Quantum Physics

Ruiz-Tagle also shows a disquieting lack of interest in having more than superficial social relationships with most of his fellow aspiring poets. Ruiz-Tagle’s most stable connection is with the beautiful Garmendia twins, Veronica and Angelica. While most of the young men in the twins’ social circle pine after them to one degree or another, the sisters only have eyes for Ruiz-Tagle.

As the novel progresses it becomes clear that Ruiz-Tagle is far more and far less than a mere poet, through progressively darker and ironic twists and turns.

The next sighting comes as the narrator stands in a prison camp for political undesirables, gazing up at a World War
II Messerschmitt skywriting over the Andes. The aviator is none other than Ruiz-Tagle, now serving in the Chilean air force under his actual name, Carlos Wieder, and writing nationalist slogans in the sky. The narrator becomes obsessed with Ruiz-Tagle, suspecting that he is behind every evil act in Pinochet’s regime.

After his release from political prison, the narrator struggles to survive and make sense of his situation. His destiny is eventually reconnected with that of Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder when a Chilean private detective seeks his help in tracking Wieder down[2] by trying to identify the air force pilot's hand

behind various articles printed in neo-fascist publications.

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Part II Uqbar and Orbis Tertius rewritten as in fact a Aeroplane Flight Handbook for those who want to Understand Science Fiction Again and this is Edited to the Spirit of Science Fiction

What star falls unseen? WILLIAM FAULKNER Machine Translated by Chapter in hand, and guided by his dreams and nightmares, we composed the novel that the reader now holds before them. My role was reduced to preparing drinks, consulting a few books, and discussing, with him and with the ever-more vivid ghost of Pierre Menard, the validity of many repeated paragraphs. Long, not a mirror or explosion of other stories, but a mirror and explosion in itself.

Thus In the final chapter of my novel , Nazi Literature in America, the story of Lieutenant Ramírez Hoffman of the Chilean Air Force was perhaps told too schematically (it was no more than twenty pages). This story was told to me by my compatriot Arturo B., a veteran of the Flower Wars and a suicide in Africa, who was not satisfied with the final result. The last chapter of Nazi Literature served as a counterpoint, perhaps as an anticlimax to the literary grotesqueness that preceded it, and Arturo wanted a more complete story. Well, we locked ourselves away for a month and a half in my house in Blanes and with the last. We were between seventeen and twenty-three years old (I was eighteen) and almost all of us were studying Juan Stein, in Concepción, the so-called capital of the South. I

can't say I knew him well. I saw him once or twice a week, when I went to his workshop. He didn't talk much. Salvador Allende was president of Chile. The first time I saw Carlos Wieder was in 1971 or maybe 1972, when Back then he called himself Alberto Ruiz-Tagle and sometimes went to the poetry workshop of Yes, I did. Most of us who went talked a lot: not only about poetry, but also about politics, about travel (which at the time none of us imagined would become what it would later become). We were like a dream, or more accurately, like the key that would unlock the door to dreams, the only ones worth living for. And although we vaguely knew that dreams often turn into nightmares, we didn't care. were), of painting, of architecture, of photography, of revolution and armed struggle; the armed struggle

that was going to bring us a new life and a new era, but which for most of In the Faculty of Arts, there were no students, except for the Garmendia sisters, who were studying sociology and psychology, and Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, who once claimed to be self-taught. There's much to say about being self-taught in Chile in the days leading up to 1973. The truth was, he didn't seem self-taught. I mean, outwardly he didn't look like one. Self-taught people in Chile in the early seventies, in the city of Concepción, didn't dress the way Ruiz-Tagle did. Self-taught people were poor. He did speak like one, though. He spoke the way I suppose all of us who are still around still speak now. He was very lively (he spoke as if he lived in a dream), but he dressed too well for someone who had never set foot in a university. I don't mean to say he

was elegant—although in his own way he was—nor that he dressed in any particular style; his tastes were eclectic: sometimes he appeared in a suit and tie, other times in sportswear; he didn't disdain the Blue jeans or T-shirts. But whatever he wore, Ruiz-Tagle always had expensive, designer clothes. In short, Ruiz-Tagle was elegant, and back then I didn't think that self-taught Chileans, always teetering between madness and despair, could be elegant. He once said that his father or grandfather had owned a farm near Puerto Montt. He recounted, or we heard Verónica Garmendia recount, that he decided to stop studying at fifteen to dedicate himself to farm work and reading from his father's library. Those of us who went to Juan Stein's workshop assumed he was a good horseman. I don't know why, since

we never saw him ride. In reality, all the assumptions we could make about Ruiz-Tagle were predetermined by our jealousy or perhaps our envy. Ruiz-Tagle was tall, thin, but strong and of DISTANT STAR 1 7 Machine Translated by Google 8 ROBERTO BOLAÑO He enrolled in Stein's workshop in '71 or '72. Nobody had ever seen him before, not at the university or anywhere else. Stein didn't ask him where he was from. He asked him to read three poems and said they weren't bad. (Stein only openly praised the poems of the Garmendia sisters.) And he stayed with us. At first, the rest of us paid little attention to him. But when we saw that the Garmendia sisters became friends with him, we also became friends with Ruiz-Tagle. Until then, his attitude had been one of distant cordiality. Only with the

Garmendia sisters (in this he resembled Stein) was he genuinely friendly. They were, I admit, the best. Verónica and Angélica Garmendia, so alike some days that it was impossible to tell them apart, and so different other days (but especially on nights) that they seemed like complete strangers, if not outright enemies. Stein adored them. He, along with RuizTagle, was the only one who always knew who was Verónica and who was Angélica. I can hardly speak about them. Sometimes they appear in my nightmares. They're my age, maybe a year older, and they're tall, slender, with dark skin and very long black hair, as I believe was the fashion at the time. full of kindness and attention. As I've already said, he treated the rest of us with a The differences between Ruiz-Tagle and the rest were noticeable. We spoke

in parents (those of us from Concepción) or in poor student boarding houses. Ruiz-Tagle lived alone in a four-room apartment near the center, with the curtains permanently drawn, which I never visited but which Bibiano and Gorda Posadas told me about. What did Bibiano tell me about Ruiz-Tagle's house? He spoke mainly of its nakedness; he had the impression that the house was staged. He only went there alone once. She decided to invite him to the cinema. They were showing a Bergman film, I don't remember which one. Bibiano had been to the house a couple of times before, always accompanying one of the Garmendia women, and on both occasions We almost never had money (it's funny to write the word money now : it shines like an eye in the night); Ruiz-Tagle never lacked money. On those occasions,

the visit was, so to speak, expected. Then, in those slang or in a Marxist-Mandrakist jargon (most of us were members or sympathizers of the MIR or Trotskyist parties, although some, I think, were members of the Youth The Garmendia sisters became friends with Ruiz-Tagle almost immediately. Beautiful features. According to Bibiano O'Ryan, his features were too cold to be beautiful, but, of course, Bibiano said this after the fact, and that doesn't count. Why were we jealous of RuizTagle? The plural is excessive. I was the one who was jealous. Perhaps Bibiano shared my jealousy. The reason, of course, was the Garmendia sisters, monozygotic twins and undisputed stars of the poetry workshop. So much so, that sometimes we (Bibiano and I) had the impression that Stein ran the workshop solely for their benefit.

"distant cordiality," that is, he would greet us, smile at us, when we read poems he was discreet and measured in his critical appreciation, he never defended his texts from our attacks (we tended to be devastating) and he listened to us, when we spoke to him, with something that today I would never dare to call attention to but that then seemed so to us. Socialists, or in the Communist Party, or in one of the Catholic left-wing parties). Ruiz-Tagle spoke in Spanish. That Spanish of certain places in Chile (places more mental than physical) where time seems to stand still. We lived with our He was passing by and decided (that's Bibiano for you) to invite Ruiz-Tagle to the movies. He barely knew him and They told stories, many years later (things already influenced by the cursed legend of Wieder), and I don't know

whether to believe them or attribute them to the imagination of my former classmate.

And besides, he explained, he didn't like Bergman's films. By then Bibiano was sure there was another person in the house, someone motionless and listening behind the door. Ruiz-Tagle, evidently, wasn't expecting him. He took his time opening the door. When he did, he didn't seem to recognize Bibiano, although Bibiano assures me that Ruiz-Tagle opened the door with a smile and never stopped smiling. It wasn't very light, as he himself admits, so I don't know how close my friend is to the truth. In any case, Ruiz-Tagle opened the door and, after a somewhat incongruous exchange (it took him a while to understand that Bibiano was there to invite him to the movies), he

closed it again, but not before telling him to wait a moment. After a few seconds, he opened it again and this time invited him in. The house was dimly lit. The smell was thick, as if Ruiz-Tagle had prepared the evening. During visits with the Garmendias, the house seemed staged, arranged for the eyes of those who arrived, too empty, with spaces where something was clearly missing. In the letter where he explained these things to me (a letter written many years later), Bibiano said he had felt like Mia Farrow in Rosemary's Baby, when she goes for the first time, with John Cassavetes, to her neighbors' house. Something was missing. In the house in Polanski's film, what was missing were the paintings, prudently taken down so as not to frighten Mia and Cassavetes. In Ruiz-Tagle's house, what was

missing was something unnameable (or that Bibiano, years later and now aware of the story, or at least a good part of it, considered it unspeakable, yet present and tangible, as if the host had amputated pieces of his home. Or as if it were a Meccano set that adapted to the expectations and particularities of each visitor. This feeling intensified when he went to the house alone. He thought that it must be Verónica, because otherwise how could he explain why RuizTagle, usually so discreet, mentioned her? Bibiano said a Bergman film, at the Lautaro Theater. Ruiz-Tagle smiled again, that smile that Bibiano found enigmatic and that I found self-sufficient, if not downright arrogant. He apologized, saying he already had an appointment with Verónica Garmendia. Earlier, he had eaten a very heavy meal, full of fat and

spices. For a moment, Bibiano thought he heard a noise in one of the rooms and imagined Ruiz-Tagle was with a woman. As he was about to apologize and leave, Ruiz-Tagle asked him what movie he planned to see. To say goodbye to Ruiz-Tagle and never return to that bare, bleeding house. Those are his words. Although, as he describes it, the house couldn't have looked more like it. Aseptic. Clean walls, books arranged on a metal shelf, armchairs covered with southern ponchos. On a wooden stool sat Ruiz-Tagle's Leica, the same one he used one afternoon to take photos of all the members of the poetry workshop. The kitchen, which Bibiano could see through a half-open door, looked normal, without the typical pile of pots and dirty dishes one would expect in the home of a student living alone (but Ruiz-

Tagle was n't a student). In short, nothing out of the ordinary. except for the noise that could well have come from the neighboring apartment. According to Bibiano, while Ruiz-Tagle was speaking, he had the impression that Ruiz-Tagle didn't want him to leave, that he was speaking precisely to keep him there. This impression, without any objective basis, contributed to increasing my friend's nervousness to levels that, according to him, were intolerable. The strangest thing is that Ruiz-Tagle seemed to enjoy the situation: he noticed that Bibiano was becoming increasingly pale or sweaty and continued talking (about Bergman, I suppose) and smiling. The house remained silent, and the words of But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't imagine our poet in that situation. Neither Verónica nor Angélica Garmendia

were listening behind the doors. Who, then? Bibiano doesn't know. At that moment, probably, the only thing he knew was that he wanted to leave. Machine Translated by Google 10 ROBERTO BOLAÑO Garmendia. (The best poets or prospective poets were in Juan Stein's workshop.) Self-taught, yes, but eager to learn, as Bibiano and I decided when we saw him show up at Diego Soto's poetry workshop, the other leading workshop at the University of Concepción, which rivaled, let's say, Juan Stein's workshop in ethics and aesthetics, although Stein and Soto were what was then called, and I suppose still is, soulmates. Soto's workshop was in the Faculty of Medicine, I don't know why, in a poorly ventilated and sparsely furnished room, separated only by a hallway from the amphitheater where students

dissected cadavers in anatomy classes. The amphitheater, of course, smelled of formaldehyde. The hallway, sometimes, also smelled of formaldehyde. And some nights—because Soto's workshop met every Friday from eight to ten, although it usually ended after midnight—the room became permeated with the smell of formaldehyde, which we tried in vain to mask by lighting one cigarette after another. It's sad to admit, but it's true. Verónica was in love with Ruiz-Tagle. And Angélica might even have been in love with him too. Bibiano and I talked about this once, a long time ago. I suppose what hurt us was that neither of the Garmendia sisters was in love with us or even interested in us. Bibiano liked Verónica. I liked Angélica. We never dared say a word to them about it, even though I think our

interest in them was quite obvious. Ruiz-Tagle only accentuated it, without ever breaking it. What was she talking about? Bibiano wonders. It would be important, he writes in his letter, that she remember, but no matter how hard he tries, it's impossible. The truth is that Bibiano held out as long as he could, then said goodbye rather hastily and left. On the stairs, shortly before going out into the street, he ran into Verónica Garmendia. She asked him if something was wrong. "What could be wrong?" Bibiano said. "I don't know," Verónica said, "but you're as white as a sheet of paper." "I'll never forget those words," Bibiano says in his letter: " pale as a sheet of paper. And Verónica Garmendia's face. The face of a woman in love." Those who frequented Stein's workshop didn't go to Soto's, and vice versa, except

for Bibiano O'Ryan and me, who actually compensated for our chronic absence from classes by attending not only the workshops but every recital or cultural and political gathering in the city. So, seeing Ruiz-Tagle show up there one night was a surprise. His attitude was more or less the same as it had been in Stein's workshop. He listened; his critiques were measured, brief, and always delivered in a kind and polite tone. He read his own work with detachment and distance and accepted even the worst comments without complaint, as if the poems he submitted for our critique weren't his own. Bibiano and I weren't the only ones who noticed this; one night Diego Soto told him that he wrote with detachment and coldness. "They don't seem like your poems," he said. Ruiz-Tagle

acknowledged this without flinching. "I'm searching," he replied. At the Ruiz-Tagle Faculty of Medicine workshop, he met Carmen Villagrán and they became friends. Carmen was a good poet, though not as good as the sisters. Something in which we were no different from the rest of the male members of the workshop; all of them, to a greater or lesser degree, were in love with the Garmendia sisters. But they, or at least one of them, were captivated by the rare charm of the self-taught poet. He also met and became friends with Marta Posadas, nicknamed "Fat Posadas," the only medical student in the workshop at the Faculty of Medicine, a very fair-skinned girl, very fat and very sad, who wrote prose poems and what she really wanted was...Bibiano was carrying a folder with texts from the people in Stein's and Soto's

workshops for his eleventh short anthology of young poets from Concepción, which no newspaper would publish. La Gorda Posadas and I started flipping through the papers. "Who are you going to include in the anthology?" I asked, knowing that I was one of those selected. (Otherwise The clever people of Concepción didn't notice anything. The Garmendia sisters Juan Stein and Diego Soto, who for me and Bibiano were the most important people At least back then, it was to become a kind of Marta Harnecker of literary criticism. He made no friends among men. When he saw Bibiano and me, he greeted us politely but without showing the slightest sign of familiarity, even though we saw each other for about eight or nine hours a week, between Stein's and Soto's workshops. Men didn't seem to matter to him in the

slightest. He lived alone; there was something strange about his house (according to Bibiano). He lacked the childish pride that other poets usually had for their own work. He was friends not only with the most beautiful girls of my time (the Garmendia sisters) but had also won over the two women in Diego Soto's workshop. In short, he was the object of Bibiano O'Ryan's envy and my own. And nobody knew him. Nor, on the contrary, on two occasions Angelica praised Ruiz-Tagle's virtues in front of me: serious, formal, orderly-minded, with a great capacity to listen to others. Bibiano and I hated him, but we didn't notice anything either. Only Gorda Posadas grasped something of what was really going on behind Ruiz-Tagle's back. I remember the night when We talked. We had gone to the cinema and after the film we went

into a restaurant downtown. My friendship with Bibiano would probably have ended the next day.) To you, Bibiano said, to Martita (the Fat One), to Verónica and Angélica, of course, to Carmen, then he named two poets, one from Stein's workshop and the other from Soto's, and finally he said Ruiz-Tagle's name. I remember that the Fat One remained silent for a moment while her fingers (Permanently stained with ink and with rather dirty fingernails, which seemed odd for a medical student, although when La Gorda spoke of her studies she did so in such languid terms that one had no doubt she would never obtain her degree) they rummaged through the papers until they found the three pages by Ruiz-Tagle. "Don't include it," she said suddenly. "RuizTagle?" I asked, not believing what I was hearing, since La Gorda

was a devoted admirer of his. Bibiano, on the other hand, said nothing. The three poems were short, none exceeding ten lines: one spoke of a landscape, described a landscape, trees, a dirt road, a house set back from the road, wooden fences, hills, clouds; according to Bibiano it was "very Japanese"; in my opinion it was as if Jorge Teillier had written it after suffering a concussion. The second poem was about the air (it was called Air) that seeped through the cracks of a stone house. (In this one, it was as if Teillier had gone aphasic and persisted in his literary endeavor, which shouldn't have surprised me since by then, in '73, at least half of Teillier's adopted children had gone aphasic and persisted.) I've completely forgotten the last one. I only remember that at some point a knife appeared out of

nowhere (or so it seemed to me). "Why do you think I shouldn't include it?" Bibiano asked, with one arm stretched out on the table and his head resting on it, as if his arm were the pillow and the table the bed in his bedroom. "I thought you were friends," I said. "And we are," said the Fat Lady, "but I still wouldn't include it." "Why?" said Bibiano. The Fat Lady shrugged. "It's as if they weren't his poems," she said later. "Really yours, I don't know if I'm making myself clear." "Explain yourself," Bibiano said. La Gorda looked me in the eyes (I was facing her). Machine Translated by Google 12 ROBERTO BOLAÑO "He has an iron will," she added, "you don't know him." It was late. Bibiano looked at La Gorda and got up to pay. "If you have so much faith in him, why don't you want Bibiano to include him in his anthology?" I

asked. We put our scarves around our necks (I've never worn scarves that long since) and went out into the cold street. "Because they are n't his poems," La Gorda said. "And how do you know that?" I asked, exasperated. "Because I know people," La Gorda said sadly, looking at the empty street. I thought it was the height of presumption. Bibiano came out after us. "Martita," he said, "I'm sure of very few things, one of them being that Ruiz-Tagle isn't going to revolutionize Chilean poetry." "I don't think he's even a leftist," I added. Surprisingly, La Gorda agreed with me. "No, he's not a leftist," she conceded, her voice growing increasingly sad. For a moment I thought she was going to start crying, and I tried to change the subject. Bibiano laughed. "With friends like you, Martita, one doesn't

need enemies." Of course, Bibiano was joking, but Gorda didn't see it that way and wanted to leave immediately. We walked her home. During the bus ride, we talked about the movie and the political situation. Before saying goodbye, she looked at us intently and said she had to ask us to promise her something. "What?" Bibiano asked. "I didn't..." "That's what he tells the others," said the Fat Lady. "And what does he tell you?" The Fat Lady thought for a while before answering. "About the new poetry, of course, what else?" "The poetry he plans to write?" Bibiano asked skeptically. "The poetry he's going to write, " said the Fat Lady. "And do you know why I'm so sure? Because of his own will." For a moment she waited for us to ask her something else. (She and Bibiano, who seemed asleep beside her) and said:

Part III – How this then is a Ficcion and A Ficcion Means Science and Literature both about Astronomy Finally – I mean that by Tlon, Jorge Argues to Bolano when he meets him in Argentina and Met at a Wrought Iron and Glass Construction in Madrid as Well.

Alberto is a good poet, but he hasn't exploded yet. Do you mean he's a virgin? said Bibiano, but neither La Goda. The aunt, surely, thinks he's a It had to be this way. One evening, one of those vigorous yet melancholic southern evenings, a car appears on the dirt road, but the Garmendias don't. A nice, handsome, and polite young man. The Garmendia family is happy. RuizTagle, by Maluenda. Oyarzún), and then he talks about Enrique Lihn and civic poetry and if the Garmendias had The Garmendia

sisters spoke of their parents (according to them, Julián Garmendia was one of the best). On the verge of concluding something new, which until it is finished and corrected he prefers not to reveal, he smiles, shrugs, says no, sorry, no, no, no, and the Garmendias nod, aunt, don't be a pain, they think they understand, innocent, they understand nothing (the "new Chilean poetry" is about to be born), but they think they understand and they read his poems, his wonderful poems, before the pleased expression of Ruiz-Tagle (who From this point on, my story will be based primarily on conjecture. The Garmendia family... So they went to Nacimiento, and locked themselves in the house, and one fine day, let's say The maid answers the door and there is Ruiz-Tagle. He asks for the Garmendias. The maid doesn't let

him in and says she'll go call the girls. Ruiz-Tagle waits patiently, sitting in a wicker chair on the spacious porch. The Garmendias... Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. Of course, he's invited to lunch, and in his honor, they prepare a fitting dinner. I don't want to imagine what they ate. Perhaps corn pie, perhaps empanadas, but no, surely they ate something else. Naturally, they invite him to stay the night. Ruiz-Tagle readily accepts. During the after-dinner conversation, which stretches into the wee hours, the Garmendias read poems aloud to the aunt's rapture and Ruiz-Tagle's complicit silence. He, of course, doesn't read anything; he makes excuses, saying that compared to such poems, his own are superfluous. The aunt insists, "Please, Alberto, read us something of yours," but he remains unmoved,

saying he's... Machine Translated by Google 15 DISTANT STAR Maluenda. But it's only a second. Shortly after, he's at the door, breathing normally, and lets the four men who have arrived in. They greet him with a nod (which nevertheless denotes respect) and observe him with glances Everyone is asleep. He's probably slept with Verónica Garmendia. It doesn't matter. (I mean: it doesn't matter anymore, although at that moment, undoubtedly, to our misfortune, it did.) The truth is that Carlos Wieder gets up with the certainty of a sleepwalker and silently wanders through the house. He looks for his aunt's room. Her shadow And then the Garmendia sisters get up, or perhaps only Verónica gets up, and she searches in her father's large library and returns with a book by Cáceres, * Por el camino de la gran

pirámide polar* (Along the Path of the Great Polar Pyramid), published when the poet was only twenty. The Garmendia sisters, perhaps only Angélica, have spoken on occasion about republishing the complete works of Cáceres, one of the myths of our generation, so it's not surprising that Ruiz-Tagle mentioned him (although Cáceres's poetry has nothing to do with the Garmendia sisters' poetry; Violeta Parra does, Nicanor does, but not Cáceres). And he also mentions Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, and Denise Levertov (poets whom the Garmendia sisters love and whom they have translated and read in the workshop on occasion, much to Juan's satisfaction). If they had been more attentive they would have seen an ironic glint in Ruiz-Tagle's eyes, civil poetry, I'm going to give you civil poetry, and finally, already

launched into it, he speaks of Jorge Cáceres, the Chilean surrealist who died in 1949 at the age of twenty-six. Stein) and then everyone laughs at the aunt who doesn't understand anything and they eat homemade cookies and play the guitar and someone watches the maid who in turn watches them, standing in the dark part of the hallway but not daring to enter and the aunt says to her, "Come in, Amalia, don't be a fool," and the maid, attracted by the music and the revelry, takes two steps, but not one more, and then night falls, the evening comes to an end. Calmly. Wieder removes the pillow and covers her face. Then, with a single slash, he cuts her throat. At that moment, the car stops in front of the house. Wieder is already out of the room and enters the maid's quarters. But the bed is empty. For a moment, Wieder

doesn't know what to do: he feels like kicking the bed, smashing an old, rickety wooden dresser where Amalia's clothes are piled up. He walks through the hallways where paintings by Julián Garmendia and María Oyarzún hang alongside local plates and pottery. (Nacimiento is famous, I believe, for its pottery.) Wieder, in any case, opens doors with great stealth. Finally, he finds his aunt's room on the first floor, next to the kitchen. The maid's room is probably right across the hall. Just as he slips inside, he hears the sound of a car approaching the house. Wieder smiles and hurries. He leaps up to the head of the bed. In his right hand, he holds a machete. Erna Oyarzún is asleep. A few hours later Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, although I should start calling him Carlos Wieder by now, gets up. The dimly lit interior, the carpets, the

curtains—all obscene—as if from the very first moment they were searching for and assessing the most suitable places to hide. But they are not the ones who will hide. They are the ones who seek those who hide. Night comes, night goes, efficient and swift. And the bodies will never be found, or will they? There is a corpse, a single corpse that will appear years later in a mass grave, that of And behind them, night falls into the Garmendia sisters' house. And fifteen minutes later, perhaps ten, when they leave, night returns, immediately. Machine Translated by Google 16 ROBERTO BOLAÑO Angelica Garmendia, my adorable, my incomparable Angelica Garmendia, but only that one, as if to prove that Carlos Wieder is a man and not a god. Machine Translated by Google Slowly, through the clouds, the plane appeared. At first,

it was a blur no bigger than a mosquito. I estimated it came from a nearby air base. It happened one evening -Wieder loved sunsets- while along with other detainees, about sixty people, we were killing boredom at the La Peña Center, a transit place on the outskirts of Concepción, almost already in Talcahuano, playing chess in the courtyard or simply talking. Around that time, as the last lifeboats of the Popular Unity were sinking, I was arrested. The circumstances of my arrest are banal, if not grotesque, but the fact that I was there and not on the street or in a café or locked in my room refusing to get out of bed (and this was the most likely possibility) allowed me to witness the Carlos Wieder's first poetic act, although at that time I didn't know who Carlos Wieder was or what had happened to the Garmendia sisters.

At that moment, I don't know why, I had the feeling that I was the only prisoner looking at the sky. It was probably because I was nineteen years old. Up above, its color transmutes into a brilliant vermilion. The sky, absolutely clear half an hour before, was beginning to push some wisps of clouds eastward; the clouds, shaped like pins and cigarettes, were black and white at first, when they were still hovering over the coast, then, as they straightened their course over the city, they turned pink, and finally, as they headed toward the river And there, high up, he began to write a poem in the sky. At first, I thought the pilot had gone mad, and it didn't seem strange to me. Madness wasn't uncommon in those days. I thought he was spinning in the air, blinded by despair, and that he would then crash into some building or city

square. But then, as It seemed to be moving as slowly as the clouds, but I soon realized that was just an optical illusion. When it passed over the La Peña Center, the noise it made was like a broken washing machine. From where I was, I could see the pilot's figure, and for a moment I thought he was waving goodbye. Then the nose of the plane rose, he gained altitude, and was already flying over downtown Concepción. After a flight along the coast, it was returning to its base. Slowly but effortlessly, as if gliding through the air, it approached the city, blending in with the cylindrical clouds floating high above and the needle-like clouds being swept along by the wind almost at rooftop level. DISTANT STAR 2 17 Machine Translated by Google 18 ROBERTO BOLAÑO By then almost everyone at the La Peña Center was looking at

the sky. FEREBATUR SUPER AQUAS... extended to the southern suburbs. TERRA AUTEM ERAT INANIS... ET VACUA... ET Born of the sky itself, the letters appeared in the sky. Perfectly drawn letters of gray-black smoke against the enormous screen of pinkish-blue sky that froze the eyes of whoever looked at them. IN PRINCIPIO... CREAVIT DEUS... COELUM ET TERRAM, I read as if I were asleep. I had the impression —the hope— that it was an advertising campaign. I laughed to myself. Then the plane turned back toward us, westward, and then turned again and made another pass. This time the verse was much longer and TENEBRAE ERANT... SUPER FA-CIEM ABYSSI... ET SPIRITUS DEL... For a moment it seemed that the plane would disappear over the horizon, heading towards the Coastal Range

or the Andes Mountains, I swear I don't know, heading south, heading towards the great forests, but he returned. One of the prisoners, a man named Norberto who was going mad (at least that's what another detainee, a socialist psychiatrist who was later, I was told, shot while still in full possession of his mental and emotional faculties), had diagnosed), tried to climb the fence separating the men's yard from the women's yard and started shouting, "It's a Messerschmitt 109, a Messerschmitt fighter from the Luftwaffe, the best fighter of 1940!" I stared at him, and then at the other detainees. And the plane flew over us again. It circled over the sea, took off, and returned to Concepción. What a pilot, Norberto said, not even Galland or Rudy Rudler could do better, nor Hanna Reitsch, nor Anton Vogel, nor Karl Heinz Schwarz, nor the Bremen

Wolf of Talca, nor the Bone-Breather of Stuttgart from Curicó, nor even Hans The plane banked on one wing and headed back toward the center of Concepción. "DIXITQUE DEUS... FIAT LUX... ET FACTA EST LUX," I read with difficulty, or perhaps I guessed it, or imagined it, or dreamed it. On the other side of the fence, shading their eyes with their hands, the women also watched the plane's maneuvers intently with a stillness that weighed heavily on my heart. For a moment I thought that if Norberto had wanted to leave, no one would have stopped him. Everyone, except him, was frozen in motion, both still and guarding, their faces turned toward the sky. Until that moment I had never seen so much sadness in one place (or so I thought at the time; now some mornings of my childhood seem sadder to me than that lost sunset of

1973). At the entrance to the gymnasium where we slept on the floor at night, a couple of guards had stopped talking and were staring at the sky. All the prisoners, standing, were looking at the sky, having abandoned their chess games, their counting of the days that presumably awaited us, their confidences. Crazy Norberto, clinging to the fence like a monkey, laughed and said that the Second World War had returned to Earth. "They were wrong," he said, "those from the Third World War, it's the Second that's coming back, coming back, coming back." "It fell to us, the Chileans, what a lucky people, to receive it, to welcome it," he said, and saliva, very white saliva that contrasted with the dominant gray tone, dripped down his chin, wet the collar of his shirt, and ended up, in a kind of large, damp stain, on his

chest. And everything seemed immersed in a transparent gray color, as if the La Peña Center were disappearing into time. Machine Translated by Google 19 DISTANT STAR At that moment, preceded by a strange crackling sound, as if someone had squashed a very large insect or a very small cookie, the plane reappeared. It was coming from the sea again. I saw hands raised, pointing at it, dirty sleeves billowing up, revealing its flight path. I heard voices, but it was just the air. No one, really, dared to speak. Norberto closed his eyes tightly and then opened them, wide with shock. "Good heavens," he said, "Our Father, forgive us for the sins of our brothers and forgive us for our sins." "We are only Chileans, Lord," he said, "innocent, innocent." He said it loud and clear, his voice not trembling. We all, of course,

heard him. Some laughed. Behind me, I heard jokes that mixed mischief with blasphemy. I turned around and looked around for those who had spoken. The faces of the prisoners and the carabineros spun like on a wheel of fortune, pale and gaunt. Norberto's face, on the other hand, remained fixed on its axis. It was a kind face that was Letters faded eastward among the needle-like clouds that rose above the Biobío River. The same plane, at one point, climbed vertically and disappeared, vanishing completely from the sky. As if it were all nothing but a mirage or a nightmare. The following words remained in the sky over Concepción: ET VIDIT DEUS... Marseille reincarnated. Then Norberto looked at me and winked. His face was flushed. LUCEM QUOD... ESSET BONA... ET

DIVISIT... LUCEM A TENEBRIS. The last The police officers at the gym door had multiplied; now there were six of them, whispering amongst themselves. Norberto, in front of me, his hands gripping the fence and his feet constantly moving as if trying to dig a hole in the ground, whispered: "Is this the rebirth of the Blitzkrieg, or am I going hopelessly mad?" "Calm down," I said. "What's been posted, comrade?" I heard a miner from Lota ask. At the La Peña Detention Center, half the prisoners (men and women) were from Lota. "No idea," they answered, "but it seems important." Another voice said, "Bullshit," but the tone betrayed both fear and wonder. "I couldn't be more at ease, I'm floating on a cloud," he said. Then he sighed deeply and seemed, indeed, to calm down. sinking into the earth. A

figure that sometimes skipped like that of an unfortunate prophet witnessing the arrival of the long-proclaimed and feared messiah. The plane roared past over our heads. Norberto clutched his elbows as if he were freezing to death. This time he wrote only one word, larger than the previous ones, in what I calculated to be the exact center of the city: LEARN. Then the plane seemed to waver, lose altitude, prepare to crash onto the roof of a building, as if the pilot had cut the engine and was giving the first example of the learning he referred to or urged us to undertake. But this lasted only a moment, the time it took for the night and the wind to blur the letters of the last word. Then the plane disappeared. For a few seconds no one said anything. On the other side of the fence I heard a woman crying. Norberto,

with a calm expression, as if nothing had happened, I could see the pilot. This time he skipped the salute. He looked like a stone statue trapped inside the cockpit. The sky was darkening; night would soon cover everything. The clouds were no longer pink but black with red streaks. When he was over Concepción, his symmetrical shape resembled a Rorschach inkblot. Machine Translated by Google "I'll never forget it," I said. "Did you realize it was a Messerschmitt?" "If you say so, I believe you," I said. "It was a Messerschmitt," Norberto said, "and I think it came from another world." I patted him on the back and told him that it probably was. The tail started wagging; we were going back to the gym. "And it was writing in Latin," Norberto said. "Yes," I said, "but I didn't understand a thing." "I did,"

Norberto said, "I was a master typographer for a few years, after all. It was talking about the beginning of the world, about will, about light and darkness. Lux is light. Tenebrae is darkness. Fiat is 'let it be done.' Let there be light, you get it?" "Fiat sounds like an Italian car to me," I said. "Well, it's not like that." I was talking to two very young inmates. I got the impression they were asking him for advice. My God, they were asking a madman for advice. Behind me, I heard unintelligible comments. Something had happened, but in reality, nothing had. Two teachers were talking about a Church advertising campaign. "Which Church?" I asked them. "Which one do you think?" they said, turning their backs on me. They didn't like me. Then the police woke up and lined us up in the courtyard for the

final headcount. In the women's courtyard, other voices. They were ordering us to line up. "Did you like it?" Norberto asked me. I shrugged. All I know is that "My friend. And at the end, he wished us all good luck. Can you believe it?" I said. "Yes, everyone, without exception." "A poet," I said. "A polite person, yes," Norberto said. ROBERTO BOLAÑO 20 Machine Translated by Google 21 Relentless. A few days later, before a diverse and democratic audience that came and went through the ceremonial tents of the El Cóndor military airport in a carnival-like atmosphere, he wrote a poem that a curious and well-read spectator described as lyrical. (More precisely: with a beginning that Isidore Isou wouldn't have disapproved of and an unprecedented ending worthy of a madman.) In one of his verses, he

alluded to the Garmendia sisters. He called them "the twins" and spoke of a hurricane and some lips. And although he contradicted himself immediately afterward, anyone who read it carefully could already consider them dead. Initially tentative, but later with the characteristic frankness of soldiers and gentlemen who recognize a work of art when they see it, even if they don't understand it, Wieder's presence multiplied in events and commemorations. Regarding the Las Tencas airfield, for He was soon called back for other aerial writing exhibitions. At first That first poetic action of his over the sky of Concepción earned him Carlos Wieder the instant admiration of some restless spirits in Chile. an audience composed of high-ranking officers and businessmen accompanied by their a star, the star

on our flag, shining brightly and alone on the horizon respective families - the marriageable daughters were dying for Wieder and those who were already married were dying of sadness - he drew, just a few minutes before night covered everything, According to her mother's testimony before a Church investigation team, she had arranged to meet a friend and never returned. The mother managed to ask who this friend was. From the doorway, Carmen replied that he was a poet. Years later, Bibiano O'Ryan discovered Patricia's identity; according to him, she was Patricia Méndez, seventeen years old, a member of a literature workshop run by the Communist Youth, and disappeared around the same time as Carmen Villagrán. The difference between the two was Remarkably, Carmen read Michel

Leiris in French and came from a middle-class family; Patricia Méndez, besides being younger, was a devotee of Pablo Neruda and came from a working-class background. She wasn't studying at university, like Carmen, although she aspired to one day study education; in the meantime, she worked in an appliance store. Bibiano visited his mother and was able to read some of Patricia's poems in an old calligraphy notebook. They were bad, according to Bibiano, in the vein of Neruda's worst work, a kind of hodgepodge between Twenty Love Poems and Incitement to Nixonicide, but reading between the lines you could see something. Freshness, wonder, a zest for life. In any case, Bibiano concluded his letter, nobody gets killed for writing badly, especially if they haven't even turned twenty yet. In another, he

mentioned a woman named Patricia and another named Carmen. The latter was probably the poet Carmen Villagrán, who disappeared in early December. He told her DISTANT STAR 3 Machine Translated by Google (They indulgently thought the lieutenant was just making fun of them.) For them, what that many people, poets and professors, for example, the people of the oases or the poor Wieder's actions on board the plane were nothing more than a dangerous display, dangerous in every sense, but not poetry. Around that time he participated in two other air shows, one in Santiago, where he again wrote verses from the Bible and the Chilean Rebirth, and the other in Los Angeles (Bío-Bío province), where he shared the sky with two other pilots who, unlike Wieder, were civilians, and also much older than him and with a long

career as air advertisers, and with whom he drew, together, a large (and at times wavering) Chilean flag in the sky. Always at night, either drinking or locking himself in disreputable establishments. But the spots were, on closer inspection, nothing more than that: imperceptible black marks that in no way affected his character or his manners, much less his habits. Something even essential, some surmised, for his literary career, which aimed for knowledge and the absolute. Lovely weather. They said of him (in some newspapers, on the radio) that he was capable of the greatest feats. Nothing could resist him. His instructor at the Academy declared that he was a No poetry at all. Or so they thought. (Wieder, of course, told them that they did know, that they knew more.) During his air show at El Cóndor, Wieder

would say: Apprentices of Fire. The generals watching him from the VIP box on the runway thought, I suppose quite rightly, that it was the name of his girlfriends, his female friends, or perhaps the alias of some prostitutes from Talcahuano. Some of his closest confidants, however, knew that Wieder was naming, conjuring up, dead women. But these latter did not know Immaculate deserts, but their ruffians didn't understand it, or at best... Barbara, a literary movement that would have a decisive importance in the last years of his life), Wieder spent it without his parents, a brave and shy teenager (according to his classmate) from whom one could expect anything, any extravagance, any explosive, but at the same time endearing to those around him. My mother and grandmother adored him (says his

classmate), according to them Wieder always seemed to have just emerged from a storm, defenseless, soaked to the bone by the rain, but at the same A natural-born, seasoned pilot with instinct, capable of piloting fighters and fighter-bombers without the slightest hesitation. However, his social standing had its downsides: bad company, shady characters, parasites from police stations or the underworld with whom Wieder sometimes hung out, Difficulty. A classmate, on whose estate he spent a holiday during his adolescence, confessed that Wieder, to the astonishment and subsequent anger of his parents, had piloted an old, dilapidated Piper without permission, which he then landed on a narrow, bumpy country road. That summer, presumably the summer of '68 (the Southern Hemisphere

summer that preceded by a few months the genesis of Scripture in a modest Parisian gatehouse). A career that in those days, the days of the air shows, received the backing of one of the most influential literary critics in Chile (something that in literary terms means almost nothing, but in Chile, since the time of Alone, means a lot), a certain Nicasio Ibacache, an antique dealer and a Catholic who attended daily mass, although a personal friend of Neruda and before that of Huidobro, and a correspondent of Gabriela Mistral, and a favorite target of Pablo de Rokha, and the discoverer (according to him) of Nicanor Parra, in short, a guy who knew English and French and who died at the end of the seventies of a heart attack. ROBERTO BOLAÑO 22 Machine Translated by Google 23 DISTANT

STAR news, one good and one bad. The good news was that we had been expelled from the university. Ibacache's apologia, the only one the prolific critic wrote about Wieder, was illustrated with two photographs. The first shows an airplane, or perhaps a small plane, and its pilot on what appears to be a modest, presumably military, runway. The photo is taken from a distance, so Wieder's features are blurred. He is wearing a leather jacket with a fur collar, a Chilean Air Force peaked cap, jeans, and boots to match his jeans. The caption reads: Lieutenant Ibacache advised Wieder not to stop reading. Read, young man, he seemed to say, read the English poets, the French poets, the Chilean poets, and Octavio Paz. In his weekly column for El Mercurio, Ibacache wrote a commentary on Wieder's peculiar

poetry. The text in question stated that we (the readers of Chile) were in the presence of the great poet of our times. Then, as was his custom, he proceeded to publicly offer Wieder some advice and elaborated on cryptic and sometimes incoherent comments about different editions of the Bible— it was there that we learned that Wieder used the Vulgate in his first apparition over the skies of Concepción and the La Peña Center. Latin translated into Spanish "according to the sense of the holy fathers and Catholic commentators" by the Most Illustrious Mr. Felipe Scio de S. Miguel and published in several volumes by Gaspar y Roig Editores, Madrid, 1852, just as, Ibacache said, Wieder himself had confided to him during a long night telephone conversation in which he asked him why he did not use the

translation of the reverend father Scio and Wieder's answer was: because Latin was better embedded in heaven; Although Wieder should have actually used the word "empotrar" (to embed), Latin is better embedded in the heavens, which, on the other hand, did not prevent him from using Spanish in his subsequent appearances—referring, as could not be otherwise, to several Bibles mentioned by Borges and even to the Jerusalem Bible translated into Spanish by Raimundo Pellegrí and published in Valparaíso in 1875, a cursed edition that, according to Ibacache, foreshadowed and anticipated the War of the Pacific that a few years later would pit Chile against the Peruvian-Bolivian Alliance. Regarding advice, he warned the young poet of the dangers of "too early glory," of the drawbacks of the

literary avant-garde "which can create confusion in the boundaries that separate poetry from painting and theater, or rather from the plastic event and the theatrical event," and of the need to persevere in lifelong learning, that is, in good Carlos Wieder at the Los Muleros airfield. In the second photo, he can be seen more clearly. Will than clarity, some of the verses that the poet wrote about the sky of Los Angeles, after the great composition of the Chilean flag. Shortly before, I had left La Peña Detention Center, free without charges, like most of those who passed through there. For the first few days, I didn't leave the house, to the point of alarming my mother and father and prompting ridicule from my two younger brothers, who quite rightly called me a coward. After a week, I received a visit from Bibiano

O'Ryan. He said, when we were alone in my room, that he had two The bad news was that almost all our friends had disappeared. I told him they were probably arrested or had run away, like the Garmendia sisters, to the country house. No, Bibiano said, the twins have disappeared too. He said "twins" and his voice broke. What followed is difficult to explain (although in this story everything is difficult to explain). Bibiano threw himself into my arms (literally). I was sitting at the foot of the bed, and he began to sob uncontrollably on my chest. At first, I thought he was having some kind of attack. Then I realized, without the slightest Machine Translated by Google We agreed on a time, and I showed up right on time. The house was empty. Wasn't Ruiz-Tagle there? Yes, said Gorda, but the house was empty, not a

single piece of furniture left. Are you moving in, Alberto? I asked him. Yes, Gorda, he said, can you tell? I was very nervous, but I That night, Bibiano and I went to see Gorda Posadas. At first glance, she seemed the same as always, even better, more lively. Hyperactive, she never stopped moving from one place to another, which eventually frayed the nerves of anyone around her. She hadn't been expelled from the university. Life went on. It was necessary to do things (anything, even moving a vase five times in half an hour, to avoid going crazy) and find the positive side of every situation, that is, to face situations one by one and not all at once as she had been accustomed to doing until then. And to mature. But we soon discovered that Gorda's problem was fear. She was more scared than she had ever been in her life. "I saw

Alberto," she told me. Bibiano nodded; he already knew the story, and I got the impression that he doubted the veracity of some parts of it. "He called me," Gorda said, "he wanted me to come see him at his house." I told her that he was never home. She asked me how I knew and laughed. I already noticed a tone in his voice like A hint of doubt crept in, that we would never see the Garmendia sisters again. Then Bibiano stood up, went to the window, and quickly composed himself. "It's all in the realm of conjecture," he said, turning his back on me. "Yes," I said, not knowing what he meant. "There's a third piece of news," Bibiano said, as one might expect. "Good or bad?" I asked. "Heartbreaking," Bibiano said. "Go ahead," I said, but immediately added, "No, wait, let me breathe," which was like saying,

"Let me look at my room, my house, my parents' faces one last time." It was veiled, but Alberto has always been somewhat secretive, so I didn't think much of it. I went to see him. I checked and told him that lately everyone was leaving. He asked me who "everyone" was. "Diego Soto," I said, "has left Concepción. And Carmen Villagrán too." And I mentioned you (me), who at the time didn't know where you'd gone, and the Garmendia sisters. "You didn't mention me," Bibiano said, "you didn't say anything about me." No, I didn't say anything about you. And what did Alberto say? The Fat Lady looked at me and only then did I realize She recounted that she was not only intelligent but also strong, and that she suffered greatly (but not for political reasons; the Fat Lady suffered because she weighed over eighty kilos and because she

watched the spectacle— the spectacle of sex and blood, and also of love—from an audience with no way out of the stage, cut off, and sealed off). She said that rats always ran away. I couldn't believe what I had just heard and said to her, "What did you say?" I was in a corner and he was in the middle of the living room. I swear I thought he was going to hit me, that suddenly, catching me by surprise, he was going to start hitting me with the head of a knife. For a moment I thought I was going to pee right there. Alberto wouldn't take his eyes off me. I wanted to ask him what was going to happen to me, but I couldn't get the words out. "Stop making up stories," I whispered. Alberto didn't hear me. He seemed to be waiting for someone else. We didn't speak. "I've never been more vulgar in my life," said the Fat Lady.

Alberto looked like a snake. No: he looked like an Egyptian pharaoh. He just smiled and kept looking at me, although at times I had the impression he was moving around the empty apartment. But how could he move if he was standing still? "The Garmendias are dead," he said. "Villagrán too." "I don't believe it," I said. "Why would they be dead? Are you trying to scare me, you idiot? All the poetesses are dead," he said. "That's the truth, fatty, and you'd do well to believe me." We were sitting on the floor. Then Alberto turned around and looked at me with a big smile on his face. "This is over, fatty," he said. Then I got scared and told him to stop with the riddles and tell me something more entertaining. "Stop messing around, you son of a bitch, and answer me when I'm talking to you." ROBERTO BOLAÑO 24 Machine Translated by

Google the possibility that pilot Wieder's grandfather was named Weider and that in the "And what happened to the Garmendia sisters?" I asked. "I don't know," said La Gorda, coming out of her reverie. "How am I supposed to know?" "Why didn't she do anything to you?" Bibiano asked. "Because we really were friends, I suppose," La Gorda said. He was holding a huge yellow handkerchief, which he used to blow his nose twice. "You have the flu," I said, smiling at him. "You're so mean, Gorda," he said, "I just have a cold." It was the perfect time to leave, so I got up and told him I'd already bothered him enough. "You're never a bother to me," he said. "You're one of the few who understand me, Gorda, and I'm grateful for that. But today I don't have any tea or wine or whiskey or anything. You see, I'm..." A long

time. Without meaning to, I had closed my eyes. When I opened them, Alberto was standing leaning against the kitchen door, looking at me. "You were asleep, Gorda," he said. "Were you snoring?" I asked. "Yes," he said, "you were snoring." Only then did I realize that Alberto had a cold. "Transfer." "Sure," I said. I waved goodbye, something I don't usually do when I'm indoors but outdoors, and I left. The accusative preposition Wider was distinguished orthographically to better differentiate its meaning. Wider, in Old High German Widar or Widari, means "against," "in front of," sometimes "towards." And he offered examples: Widerchrist, "Antichrist"; Widerhaken, "hook"; Widerraten, "dissuasion"; Widerlegung, "apology" or "refutation"; Widerlage, "spur" or "counter-accusation";

Widernatürlichkeit, "monstrosity" or "aberration." All words that seemed highly revealing to him. And even, once he got into the subject, he said that Weide meant "weeping willow," and that Weïden meant "to graze," "to tend to grazing animals," which led him to think of Silva Acevedo's poem, Wolves and Sheep, and the prophetic character that some claimed to see in it. And even Weiden also meant to morbidly revel in the contemplation of an object that excites our sexuality and/or our sadistic tendencies. And then Bibiano would look at us, his eyes wide, and we would look at him, the three of us still, with our hands clasped, as if we were reflecting or praying. And then he would return to Wieder, exhausted, terrified, as if time were passing by us like an earthquake, and it pointed We continued talking for a long time.

Wieder, according to Bibiano, meant "again," "once again," "for the second time," "back again," and in some contexts "over and over again," "next time" in phrases that refer to the future. And according to his friend Anselmo Sanjuán, a former German philology student at the University of Concepción, only from the 17th century onward did the adverb Wieder and the In early 20th-century immigration offices, a typo would have turned Weider into Wieder. That is, unless his name was Bieder, meaning "upright" or "modest," given that the labidental W and the bidental B easily confuse the ear. And I also remembered that the noun Widder means "ram" and "aries," and from there one could draw whatever conclusions one wished. Widerklage, Two days later, Gorda called Bibiano and told him that Alberto Ruiz-Tagle was Carlos

Wieder. She had recognized him from the photo in El Mercurio. Quite improbable, as Bibiano pointed out to me weeks or months later, since the photo was blurry and unreliable. On what did the Fat Lady base her identification? On a seventh sense, I It seems, Bibiano said, that she thinks she recognizes Ruiz-Tagle by his posture. In any case, in DISTANT STAR 25 Machine Translated by Google 26 ROBERTO BOLAÑO It was 1974, if memory serves. One day the press informed us that Carlos Wieder, under the sponsorship of several private companies, was flying to the North Pole. The shoe shop wasn't good or bad, and it was in a neighborhood near the city center, surrounded by secondhand bookstores that were gradually closing their doors, mediocre restaurants where waiters hounded customers on the street

with fabulous, if somewhat dubious, invitations, and narrow, long, and dimly lit clothing stores. Of course, we never set foot in a writing workshop again. Sometimes Bibiano would explain his projects to me: he wanted to write fables in English that would take place in the Irish countryside, By that time, Ruiz-Tagle had disappeared forever, and we only had Wieder to give meaning to our miserable days. Bibiano began working at that time as a clerk in a shoe store. South. The journey was difficult and fraught with layovers, but in every place he landed he wrote his poems in the sky. They were the poems of a new iron age for the race Nazism in our continent, from Canada (where Quebecers could be a great source of interest) to Chile, where he was sure to find trends to suit all tastes. Meanwhile, he didn't forget Carlos

Wieder and collected everything that appeared about him or his work with the passion and dedication of a philatelist. He wanted to learn French, at least so he could read Stendhal in his own language; he dreamed of locking himself inside Stendhal and letting the years slip by (although he himself, contradicting himself in the process, said that was possible with Chateaubriand, the Octavio Paz of the 19th century, but not with Stendhal, never with Stendhal); he wanted, finally, to write a book, an anthology of American Nazi literature. A monumental book, he would say when I went to pick him up after he left the shoe store, that would cover all manifestations of literature Before embarking on his final leg (from Punta Arenas to the Arturo Prat Antarctic Base), a celebratory dinner was held in his

honor at a local restaurant. According to accounts, Wieder drank more than he should have and slapped a sailor who hadn't shown proper respect to a lady. Several versions of this woman's story circulate; all agree that the organizers hadn't invited her and that none of the attendees knew her. The only plausible explanation for her presence there is that she either slipped in or came with Wieder. He referred to her as "my lady" or "my damsel." The woman was around twenty-five years old, tall, with black hair and a wellproportioned figure. At one point Although from the transcription of his words one perceived a speech full of neologisms and clumsiness, something natural in our adverse language, one also guessed the strength of that speech, the purity and the terminal smoothness of that

speech, a reflection of an unyielding will. Chilean, his admirers said. Bibiano followed the journey step by step. To be honest, I was no longer so interested in what that Air Force lieutenant might or might not do. Once, Bibiano showed me a photo: this one was much better than the one in which Gorda thought she recognized Ruiz-Tagle. Indeed, Wieder and RuizTagle resembled each other, but at that time all I could think about was leaving the country. The truth is that, both in the photo and in his statements, nothing remained of that Ruiz-Tagle who had been so thoughtful, so measured, so charmingly insecure (even so self-taught). Wieder was confidence and audacity personified. He spoke of poetry (not Chilean poetry or Latin American poetry, but poetry, period) with an authority that disarmed any interlocutor

(although I must say that his interlocutors at that time were journalists devoted to the new regime, incapable of contradicting an officer of our Air Force) and Machine Translated by Google 27 DISTANT STAR (he was going to go and that he would never again have a friend like him) and Carlos Wieder's pallor (a photogenic pallor) made him resemble not only the shadow that Ruiz-Tagle had been but many other shadows, other faces, other ghostly pilots who also flew from Chile to Antarctica and from Antarctica to Chile aboard planes that mad Norberto, from the depths of the night, said were Messerschmitt fighters, squadrons of Messerschmitts CHILE and was filmed and photographed. He also wrote other verses, verses about the color white and the color black, about ice, about the hidden, about

the smile of the Motherland, a The silence was like the waves of Cape Horn stretching their tongues toward the belly of the plane, waves like colossal Melvillean whales or like severed hands that tried to touch it the entire way, but silent, gagged, as if in those latitudes sound were the exclusive domain of men. Silence is like leprosy, Wieder declared, silence is like communism, silence is like a blank screen that must be filled. If you fill it, nothing bad can happen to you. If you are pure, nothing bad can happen to you. If you are not afraid, nothing bad can happen to you. According to Bibiano, that was the description of an angel. A fiercely human angel? I asked. No, asshole, Bibiano replied, the angel of our misfortune. During the celebratory dinner, perhaps during dessert, he shouted at Wieder: "Carlos, you're going to kill

yourself tomorrow!" Everyone thought it was in extremely poor taste. Then the incident with the sailor occurred. Then there were speeches, and the following morning, after sleeping three or four hours, Wieder flew to the South Pole. The journey was fraught with incidents, and on more than one occasion, the unknown woman's prediction almost came true—a woman whom none of the guests ever saw again. When he returned to Punta Arenas, Wieder declared that the greatest danger had been the silence. Faced with the journalists' feigned or genuine astonishment, he explained that A frank, delicate, sharply drawn smile, a smile like an eye that, indeed, looks at us, and then he returned to Concepción and later went to Santiago where he appeared on television (I watched the program by

force: Bibiano didn't have a TV in the boarding house where he lived and came to watch it at my house) and yes, Carlos Wieder was Ruiz-Tagle (what nerve to call himself Ruiz-Tagle, Bibiano said, he went looking for a good surname), but as if he weren't, that's what it seemed to me, the My parents' TV was black and white (my parents were happy that Bibiano was there, watching TV and having dinner with us, as if they sensed that I was Against the clear sky above the Arturo Prat base, Wieder wrote: ANTARCTICA IS escapees from World War II. But Wieder, we knew, didn't fly in a squadron. Wieder flew a small plane and he flew alone. Machine Translated by Google like Chile in those years. The story of Juan Stein, the director of our literature workshop, is outrageous. Born in 1945, at the time of the coup he had

two books published, one in Concepción (500 copies) and another in Santiago (500 copies), which together totaled no more than fifty pages. His poems were short, influenced equally by Nicanor Parra and Ernesto Cardenal, like most poets of his generation, and by the lyrical poetry of Jorge Teillier, although Stein recommended we read Lihn more than Teillier. His tastes were often different from, and even antagonistic to, ours: he didn't appreciate Jorge Cáceres (the Chilean surrealist for whom we felt geographical and gastronomic works by Pablo de Rokha (which we —and when I say we, I now realize, I think I am referring only to Bibiano O'Ryan and myself, I have forgotten the literary likes and dislikes of the others— avoided as one avoids a pit that is too deep and because it is always preferable to read Rabelais),

Neruda's love poetry and Residence on Earth (which, for us, with Neruda-itis since early childhood, produced allergies and eczema on our skin). We agreed on the aforementioned Parra, Lihn, and Teillier, although with nuances and reservations in some aspects of their work (the appearance of Artefactos, which we loved, made Stein, between indignation and perplexity, write a letter to old Nicanor reproaching him for some of the jokes he allowed himself to make at that crucial moment of the revolutionary struggle in Latin America; Parra answered him on the back of a postcard of Artefactos telling him not to worry, that nobody, neither on the right nor on the left, read it, and Stein, I know for a fact, kept the postcard with affection), and we also liked Armando Uribe Arce, Gonzalo Rojas

and some poets of Stein's generation, that is, those born in the forties, whom we frequented more for physical proximity than for aesthetic affinity but who were probably the ones who influenced us the most. Juan Luis Martínez (who seemed to us like a small compass lost in the country), Óscar Hahn (who was born in the late thirties but was the same), Gonzalo Millán (who twice came to the workshop reading his poems to us, all short, but so many poems), Claudio Bertoni (who was almost like one of our generation, those born in the fifties), Jaime Quezada (who one day got drunk with us and started praying a novena on his knees, shouting at the top of his lungs), Waldo Rojas (who was one of the first to distance himself from a certain "easy poetry" that was all the rage in adoration), nor Rosamel

del Valle, nor Anguita. He liked Pezoa Veliz (some of whose poems he knew by heart), Magallanes Moure (a frivolity we compensated for by frequenting the poetry of the horrible Braulio Arenas), the poems ROBERTO BOLAÑO 4 28 Machine Translated by Google 29 DISTANT STAR He still had a degree from his professorship at the same university. The house was filled with maps, more than books. That was the first thing that struck Bibiano and me: finding so few books (in comparison, Diego Soto's house seemed like a library) and so many maps. Maps of Chile, Argentina, Peru, maps of the Andes Mountains, a road map of Central America that I've never seen again, published by a church. Bibiano and I often went to his house, a small house near the station that Stein had been renting since his student days at the

University of Concepción, and which, already Those times, the balances of Parra and Cardenal) and, of course, Diego Soto, for Stein the The best poet of his generation, and for us one of the two best. The other was Stein. North American Protestant, maps of Mexico, maps of the Conquest of Mexico, maps of the Mexican Revolution, maps of France, of Spain, of Germany, of Italy, a map of He had many maps, as is often the case with those who fervently wish to travel but have not yet left their country. English railways and a map of train journeys in English literature, maps of Greece and Egypt, of Israel and the Near East, of the ancient and modern city of Jerusalem, of India and Pakistan, of Burma, of Cambodia, a map of the mountains and rivers of China and one of the Shinto temples of Japan, a map of the Australian desert and

one of Micronesia, a map of Easter Island and a map of the city of Puerto Montt, in southern Chile. They were in black and white. One showed a man and a woman sitting in their front doorway. The man resembled Juan Stein, with straw-blond hair and blue eyes framed by deep dark circles. They were, he told us, his father and mother. The other was a portrait—an official portrait —of a Red Army general named Ivan Cherniakovsky. According to Stein, he had been the best general of the Second World War. Bibiano, who knew about these things, named Zhukov, Koniev, Rokossovsky, Vatutin, and Malinovsky, but Stein stood firm: Zhukov had been brilliant and cold, Koniev was tough, probably a son of a bitch, Rokossovsky had talent and he had Zhukov, Vatutin was a good general but not better than the

German generals he faced, almost the same could be said of Malinovsky, none could compare to Cherniakovsky (maybe if Zhukov, Vasilievsky and the three best commanders of armored troops were combined into one person). Cherniakovski possessed a natural talent (if such a thing is possible in the art of war), was loved by his men (as much as soldiers can love a general), and was also young, the youngest of the generals in command of an army (called We soon realized that there was more between Stein and Cherniakovsky than mere admiration for the Soviet general's strategic and tactical skills. One afternoon, while discussing politics, we asked him how it was possible that he, a Trotskyist, had stooped to requesting a photograph of the general from the Soviet embassy.

We were joking, but Stein didn't take it that way and innocently confessed that the photograph was a gift from his mother, who was a first cousin of Ivan Cherniakovsky. It was she who had requested it from the embassy, many years earlier. He was a direct relative of the hero. When he left home to study in Concepción, his mother gave him the photo without saying anything else. Later, he spoke of the Cherniakovskis of the Soviet Union, very poor Ukrainian Jews, and of their fates. "fronts" in the Soviet Union) and one of the few high-ranking officers killed on the front line, in 1945, when the war was already won, at the age of thirty-nine. Next to the maps, framed and hanging on the wall, were two photographs. Both Machine Translated by Google 30 ROBERTO BOLAÑO We also learned that of the

Russian armies that participated in Operation Bagration (the destruction of Army Group Center), the one that distinguished itself the most, by far, was the Third Belorussian Front; that its advance was unstoppable and of a speed and depth never before seen; that it was the first to reach East Prussia; that he lost his parents when he was a teenager; that he lived in houses that were not his own and with families that were not his family; that he suffered the scorn and humiliations suffered by the Jews; that he showed those who despised him that he was not only their equal but much better; that during his childhood he witnessed how the followers of Petliura (nationalists) They offered the position to him, the youngest officer, provoking the resulting envy and resentment. He was under Vatutin's command (at

that time in charge of the Voronesh Front, which in Soviet military terminology is equivalent to an army, but I think this commanding the 60th Army (which in Soviet military terminology is equivalent to a corps) dissimilarities that had scattered them across the world. We deduced that his mother's father was the brother of the general's father, making him his nephew. We already admired Stein, I would say unconditionally, but from that revelation onward, our admiration grew immeasurably. Over the years, we learned more about Cherniakovski: he was the head of an armored division in the early months of the war, the 28th Tank Division; he fought, always retreating, in the Baltic States and the Novgorod region; afterwards, he was without assignment until he was given command of a corps (which in

Soviet military terminology is equivalent to a division) in the Voronezh region, subordinate to until, during the Nazi offensive of '42, the commander of the 60th Army was dismissed and... (I've already said it) whom I respected and appreciated, who turned the 60th Army into a machine of undefeated war, who advanced and advanced through the lands of Russia and then through the lands of Ukraine without anyone being able to stop him, who in 1944 was promoted to command a Front, the Third Belorussian Front, who during the 1944 offensive is responsible for the destruction of Army Group Center, which comprised four German armies, and which probably constituted the greatest of all the blows received by the Nazis during the Second World War, worse than the Siege of Stalingrad or the D-Day

landings. Normandy, worse than Operation Cobra or the crossing of the Dnieper (where he was), worse than the Ardennes counter-offensive or the Battle of Kursk (where he was). In short, as Bibiano says, quoting Parra: thus passes the glory of the world, without glory, without (of Vinnitsa has probably also been demolished), that the city of Insterburg in former East Prussia is now called Chernyakhovsk in his honor, that the kolkhoz in the village of Verbovo in the Tomashpolsky district also bears his name (today there are not even any kolkhozes), and that in the village of Oksanino in the Umansky district of the Cherkassi region a bronze bust was erected in celebration of the great general (I'll bet a month's pay that the bronze bust has been replaced; today the hero is Petliura; tomorrow who knows). Ukrainians) tortured

and then tried to kill his father in the village of Verbovo (where the little white houses are scattered across the gentle slopes), that his adolescence was a mixture of Dickens and Makarenko, that during the war he lost his brother Alexander and that the news was kept from him for an entire afternoon and night because Ivan Chernyakovsky was leading another of his offensives, that he died alone in the middle of a road, that he was twice a Hero of the Soviet Union, that he received the Order of Lenin, four Orders of the Red Banner, two Orders of Suvorov First Class, the Order of Kutuzov First Class, the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytsky First Class and numerous, countless medals, that at the initiative of the Government and the party monuments were erected to him in Vilnius and Vinnitsa (the one in

Vilnius surely no longer exists today and the Machine Translated by Google 31 DISTANT STAR the possibilities. In any case, he called it "Dr. Williams's photo" and wouldn't part with it (sometimes he called it Dr. Norman Rockwell's photo or Dr. William Rockwell's photo). It was, without a doubt, one of his most prized possessions, which shouldn't surprise anyone, since Stein was poor and owned few things. On one occasion (we were discussing beauty and truth), Verónica Garmendia asked him what he saw in the photo of Perhaps he was indeed a country doctor, and the background was composed of several fragments: the wooden fences on one side, the lawn and the lawnmower on the other, the little birds on the fences and even on the lawnmower's handlebars, the pale gray sunset sky —all from eight or nine different

photos. Stein didn't know what to say, though he admitted they were all But the fact is that Chernyakovsky's portrait, framed with a certain ostentation, was there, in Juan Stein's house, and that was probably much more important (I would venture to say infinitely more important) than the busts and cities named after him and the countless poorly paved Chernyakovsky streets in Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia. "I don't know why I have the photo," Stein told us, "surely world, without a miserable mortadella sandwich. Because he is the only Jewish general of any real importance in the Second World War, and because his fate was tragic. Although it's more likely I kept it because my mother gave it to me when I left home, like a kind of enigma: my mother didn't say anything to me,

she just gave me the portrait. What did she mean by that gesture? Was the gift of the photograph a declaration or the beginning of a dialogue? Et cetera, et cetera. The Garmendia sisters found Cherniakovsky's photograph rather hideous and would have preferred to see a portrait of Blok hanging there, whom they thought was truly handsome, or one of Mayakovsky, the ideal lover. "What's a nephew of Cherniakovsky doing teaching literature in southern Chile?" Stein sometimes wondered, preferably drunk. Other times he said he was going to use the frame to put in a photograph he had of William Carlos Williams dressed in the gear of a country doctor, that is, with the black bag, the stethoscope sticking out like a two-headed snake and almost falling out of the pocket of an old jacket worn by the years but

comfortable and effective against the cold, walking along a long, quiet sidewalk bordered by wooden railings painted white or green or red, behind which one can make out small patios or patches of grass—and the occasional lawnmower abandoned in the middle of its work—wearing a short-brimmed, dark-colored hat, and very clean, almost shiny glasses, but with a shine that doesn't invite excess or extremes, neither very happy nor very sad, and yet content (perhaps because he's warm inside his jacket, perhaps because he knows that the patient he's visiting isn't going to die), walking serenely, let's say, Carlos Williams. Regarding the authenticity of the latter, some members of the workshop, and occasionally Stein himself, had some reservations. According to the Garmendias, he looked more like President Truman

in disguise , not necessarily as a doctor, walking incognito through the streets of his town, than William Carlos Williams. For Bibiano, it was a skillful photomontage: the face was Williams's, the body was someone else's. But he never exchanged the portrait of Cherniakovski for the purported photo of William. at six o'clock in the afternoon on a winter day. Williams knew almost for certain it wasn't Williams. "I like the photo," he admitted. Stein, I like to think it's William Carlos Williams. But above all, he added after a while, when we were already engrossed in Gramsci, I like the tranquility of the photo, the certainty of knowing that Williams is doing his job, that he's on his way to his I work, on foot, along a peaceful path, without running. And even later, when we Machine Translated by Google

house. We were afraid to knock on the door because in our paranoia we imagined the house might be under surveillance, and even that a police officer might open the door, invite us in, and never let us leave again. So we walked past the house three or four times. After the coup, Stein disappeared, and for a long time Bibiano and I assumed he was dead. We were talking about the poets and the Paris Commune, he said: I don't know, almost in a whisper and I think that nobody heard him. Sometimes, we didn't see any lights and walked away with a heavy feeling of shame and also a secret relief. A week later, without saying a word, we passed by again. By Stein's house. No one answered our call. A woman glanced at us briefly. In fact, everyone assumed he was dead; everyone thought it was natural that they had killed the damned Jewish

Bolshevik. One afternoon, Bibiano and I approached his Indeterminate moments from several films heightened the feeling of loneliness and abandonment that not only Stein's house but the entire street evoked in us. The third time we went, a young woman opened the door, followed by a couple of children. Two three-year-olds: one was walking and the other was crawling. She told us that she and her husband now lived there, that she hadn't met the previous tenant, and that if we wanted to know anything, we should speak to the landlady. She was a nice woman. She showed us in and offered us a cup of tea, which Bibiano and I declined. "We don't want to bother you," we said. The maps and the photograph of General Cherniakovski had disappeared from the walls. "Was he a very dear friend

who left suddenly, without warning?" the woman asked with a smile. "Yes," we said, "something like that." Shortly afterwards I left Chile for good. I don't remember if I was living in Mexico or France when I received a very short letter from Bibiano, written in a telegraphic style, almost an enigma or nonsense (but in which one could at least glimpse a cheerful Bibiano), accompanied by a newspaper clipping, probably from a Santiago daily. The clipping alluded to several "Chilean terrorists" who had entered Nicaragua through Costa Rica with the Sandinista Front troops. One of them was Juan Stein. From that moment on, news about Stein was plentiful. He appeared and disappeared like a ghost in every place where there was fighting, in every place where Latin Americans —desperate, generous, frenzied,

brave, and detestable—destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed reality again in a final attempt doomed to failure. I saw him in a documentary about the capture of Rivas, the southern city of Nicaragua, his hair cut short, thinner than before, dressed half as a soldier and half as a summer school professor, smoking a pipe, and with the Broken glasses held together with wire. Bibiano sent me a clipping that said Stein and five other former MIR militants had fought in Angola against the South Africans. Later, I received two photocopied pages from a Mexican magazine (I was surely in Paris at the time) that referred to the differences between the Cubans in Angola and some groups of internationalists, among them two Chilean adventurers, the only survivors (according to them, and from the conversation with the

journalist, I presume it was in a bar in Luanda, so I also deduce they were drunk) of a group called Los Chilenos Voladores (The Flying Chileans), a name that reminded me of the Las Águilas circus. From a window, in the house next door, and the scene also brings to mind ROBERTO BOLAÑO 32 Machine Translated by Google 33 DISTANT STAR Stein. And he participates in several offensives and raids, and one day he disappears, and this time Angelís are legion in the ranks of the left; at least, I was saying, he doesn't yet dedicate himself to literary criticism, but that will come in time. Indeed, during the dreadful decade of the eighties, I browsed through some Mexican and Argentinian magazines and found several critical works by Di Angeli. I think he had made a name for himself. In the nineties, I haven't

come across his writing again, but that's because I read fewer and fewer magazines these days. The fact is that Stein was back in America. And he was, according to Bibiano, the same Juan Stein from Concepción, the same nephew of Ivan Cherniakovski. For a while, the length of a sigh that feels too long, he could be seen in places like the aforementioned reading of poets from the Southern Cone, at painting exhibitions, in the company of Ernesto Cardenal (twice), at a performance of By this poet (a certain Di Angeli) at the Cultural Center of Managua, one of the attendees, "a tall, blond guy with glasses," made several observations about Chilean poetry, about the selection criteria for the texts read (the organizers, including Di himself). Humanas and their endless annual tours of southern Chile.

Stein, of course, was one of the surviving MIR members. From there, I suppose, he went to Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, there are times when he disappears from view. He's one of the lieutenants of a priest-guerrilla leader who dies in the capture of Rivas. Later, he commands a battalion or a brigade, or is second-in-command of something, or goes to the rear to train newly enlisted young men. He doesn't participate in the triumphal entry into Managua. For a while, he disappears again. It's said that he's one of the members of the commando that assassinates Somoza in Paraguay. It's said that he's with the Colombian guerrillas. It's even said that he's returned to Africa, that he's in Angola or Mozambique, or with the Namibian guerrillas. He lives in danger, and like in cowboy movies, the bullet

that can kill him hasn't yet been fired. But he returns to America and for a time settles in Managua. According to Bibiano, an Argentine poet, his correspondent, explains to him that during a recital of Argentine, Uruguayan and Chilean poetry organized Angeli, had vetoed for political reasons the inclusion of poems by Nicanor Parra and Enrique Lihn), in a word, he screwed over the promoters of reading, at least as far as the Chilean lyric poetry is concerned, but yes, very calmly, without getting violent, I would say —Di Angeli said — with a lot of irony and some sadness or tiredness, who knows. (As an aside, this Di Angelí fellow, among the countless epistolary antennas Bibiano maintained with the world from his shoe shop in Concepción, was one of the most shameless, cynical, and amusing; a

typical left-wing social climber, he was nevertheless willing to apologize for his omissions and excesses of all kinds; his blunders, according to Bibiano, were legendary, and his sad life during Stalin's era would undoubtedly have served as a model for a great picaresque novel, although in 1970s Latin America it was just that, a sad life, full of petty meanness, some done without even malicious intent. He would have fared better, Bibiano said, on the right, but, mysteriously, the Di Angelís Theater. Then he disappears and is never seen in Nicaragua again. He hasn't gone too far. Some say he's with the Guatemalan guerrillas, others claim he's fighting under the banner of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. Bibiano and I agree that a guerrilla group with that name deserved to have Stein on

its side. Although Stein probably He would have killed with his own hands (in the distance his ferocity, his implacability loomed large and distorted like that of a character in a Hollywood film) those responsible for Roque Dalton's death. How can one reconcile, in the same dream or the same nightmare, the nephew of Cherniakovski, the Bolshevik Jew of the southern Chilean forests, with the sons of bitches who killed Roque Dalton in his sleep, to close the Why was there a discussion, and why did it suit their revolution? Impossible. But the fact remains, there it is. Machine Translated by Google 34 ROBERTO BOLAÑO These last ones could tell her little; they were not Jewish, they knew nothing of any Stein family or Many years later, Bibiano went to Puerto Montt and looked for Juan Stein's childhood home. He found no one by that

name. There was a Stone, two Steiners, and three Steens from the same family. He immediately ruled out the Stone. He visited the two Steiners and the three Steens. San Salvador, and it received extensive media coverage. I remember seeing snippets of that distant war in bars in Barcelona where I ate or went for drinks, but even though people were watching TV, the noise of conversations or the clatter of plates being passed around made it impossible to hear anything. Even the images I have in my memory (the images taken by those war correspondents) are hazy and fragmented. It's forever. By then I was already living in Spain, working thankless jobs, I didn't have a television, and I didn't buy the newspaper very often either. According to Bibiano, Juan Stein was killed during the last FMLN

offensive, the one that managed to conquer some neighborhoods of I only remember two things with absolute clarity: the barricades in the streets of San Salvador—very poor barricades, more like shooting positions than actual barricades—and the small, dark-skinned, wiry figure of one of the FMLN commanders. He called himself Commander Aquiles or Commander Ulysses , and I know that he was killed shortly after speaking to the television crew. According to police information, the unknown blond man is listed under the name of Jacobo Sabotinski, an Argentine citizen and former member of the ERP. A tattoo on the right arm, a rampant lion. The quality of the tattoo is good. A true artisan's work, the kind you don't see in El Salvador. At the address According to Bibiano, all the commanders of

that desperate offensive bore the names of Greek heroes and demigods. What was Stein's name: Commander Patroclus, Commander Hector, Commander Paris? I don't know. Certainly not Aeneas , nor Ulysses . At the end of the battle, during the collection of corpses, a tall, blond man appeared. The police files contain a brief description: scars on his arms and legs, old wounds, Cherniakovski asked Bibiano if he was Jewish or if there was money involved. At that time, I suppose, Puerto Montt was fully engaged in economic growth. The Steiner family were indeed Jewish, but they came from Poland, not Ukraine. The first In Llanquihue, it wasn't hard for him to find Widow Stein's house. It was a small wooden house painted green, on the outskirts of town. When he passed through the gate, a friendly dog,

white with black spots like a miniature cow, came out to greet him, and after a while, after ringing a doorbell that sounded like a bell, or perhaps was a bell, a woman of about thirty-five opened the door, one of the most beautiful women Bibiano had ever seen. were atheists. Steiner, a large, overweight agricultural engineer, wasn't much help. The second Steiner, his aunt and a piano teacher at the high school, remembered a widowed Stein who had moved to Llanquihue in 1974. But this woman, the pianist declared, wasn't Jewish. Somewhat confused, Bibiano traveled to Llanquihue. Surely, he thought, the piano teacher was mistaking the widowed Stein for someone else because of her non-practicing Judaism. Knowing Juan Stein and his family background (his uncle was a

general in the Red Army), it wasn't surprising that He asked if the widow Stein lived there. She did, but that was a long time ago, the woman replied cheerfully. What a shame, said Bibiano, I've been looking for her for ten days now, and I'll soon have to return to Concepción. The woman then invited him in, told him she was about to have tea, and asked if he would like to join her. Bibiano said yes, of course, and then Machine Translated by Google "What did he die of?" "I think cancer," the woman said, looking at Bibiano's hands. "And he was a leftist, wasn't he?" Bibiano said in a whisper. "Maybe," the woman said, suddenly cheerful again. "Her eyes were shining," Bibiano said, "like I've never seen anyone's eyes shine. He was a leftist, but he wasn't an activist. He was part of the quiet left, like..." He

no longer lives in Llanquihue? He died last year in a hospital in Valdivia, that's what I was told. We were friends, but I never went to see him in the hospital; we weren't that close a friendship. The woman confessed that Widow Stein had died three years earlier. Suddenly, the woman seemed saddened, and Bibiano told himself it was his fault. The woman had I knew the widow Stein, and although they were never friends, I had a good opinion of her: a somewhat domineering woman, one of those rigid German women, but deep down a good person. I didn't know her, Bibiano said. Actually, I was looking for her to tell her about her son's death, but perhaps it's better this way; it's always terrible to tell someone their child has died. That's impossible, the woman said. She only had one son, and he was still alive when she died.

I can say I was friends with him. Bibiano felt like the avocado toast was sticking in his throat. Only one son? Yes, a very handsome bachelor. I don't know why he never married; I suppose he was very shy. Then I must be mistaken again, Bibiano said. We must be talking about two different Stein families. The widow's son Sometimes he made the spare parts himself. Juanito Stein. Is he buried in Valdivia? I think so, the woman said, and she became sad again. So many Chileans since 1973. He wasn't Jewish, was he? No, the woman said, although who knows, I'm not really interested in religious matters, but no, I don't think they were Jewish, they were German. What was his name? Juan Stein. Juanito Stein. And what did he do? He was a teacher, although his hobby was fixing engines—tractor engines, harvester engines, well

engines, you name it—a real engine genius. And he earned a good extra income doing that. So Bibiano went to the Valdivia cemetery and for a whole day, accompanied by one of the caretakers to whom he offered a good tip, he looked for the grave of that Juan Stein, tall, blond, but who never left Chile, and no matter how much he looked he did not find it.

Indifference. Her indifference and her intelligence. Future roundness and softness were already being foreshadowed, Stein in the orbit of Latin American poetry and Diego Soto translating French poets that no one in Chile knew (and that I greatly admired). They were always together (although we never saw one in the other's workshop), always discussing poetry even if the Chilean sky was falling apart, Stein tall and

blond, Soto short and dark, Stein athletic and strong, Soto with delicate bones, with a body where Diego also disappeared in the last days of 1973 or the first days of 1974 Soto, Juan Stein's great friend and rival. I fear they still don't know). And that, naturally, angered many people. How was it possible that this small, ugly Indian was translating and corresponding with Alain Jouffroy, Denis to hide it. Writing it now seems unbelievable. But it was true; Soto's enemies would have been able to forgive him even for his biting wit; what they never forgave him for was his Roche, Marcelin Pleynet? Who, for God's sake, were Michel Bulteau, Matthieu Messagier, Claude Pelieu, Franck Venaille, Pierre Tilman, Daniel Biga? What merits did this Georges Perec have, whose books, published by Denoël, that

pretentious fool Soto paraded around? The day he stopped wandering the streets of Concepción, books under his arm, always properly dressed (unlike Stein, who dressed like a vagrant), on his way to the Faculty of Medicine or queuing at some theater or cinema, when he vanished into thin air, well, nobody missed him. Many would have been glad he died. Not for strictly political reasons (Soto was a sympathizer of the Socialist Party, but only that, a sympathizer, not even a loyal voter, I would say a pessimistic leftist) but for aesthetic reasons, for the pleasure of seeing dead someone who is more intelligent and more cultured than you and lacks social cunning But Soto, like Stein (whom he never saw again, by the way), reappeared in exile in Europe. He was first in East

Germany, from where he left at the first opportunity after several unpleasant incidents. It is said, in the sad folklore of exile—where more than half the stories are fabricated or merely a shadow of the real events—that one night another Chilean gave him a beating so severe that Soto ended up in a Berlin hospital with a head injury and two broken ribs. Afterward, he settled in France, where he eked out a living teaching Spanish and English and translating for non-commercial editions the works of some singular Latin American writers, almost all from the beginning of the century, practitioners of the fantastic or the pornographic, among them the forgotten novelist from Valparaíso, Pedro Pereda, who was both fantastical and pornographic, author of a chilling story in which a

woman's breasts grow, or more accurately, open up. ROBERTO BOLAÑO 5 Machine Translated by Google At least that's what we thought; Soto, it seems to me, never believed in curses). Sexes and anuses all over his anatomy, to the natural horror of his relatives I learned they had a son (by then I was in Spain, if that matters). In a word: Soto was happy. He believed he had escaped the curse (or the domestic help, and his wife, in her own study, near the children's room, or on a small 19th-century table in a corner of the living room, corrected exams or planned summer vacations or absentmindedly looked at the movie listings to decide which film to see. (clarification), regularly attended meetings of Chilean writers in Amsterdam, the e. (The story takes place in the 1920s, but I suppose the surprise would have

been just as great in the 1970s or 1990s), and ends up confined in a northern brothel, a brothel for miners, locked inside the brothel and within the brothel locked in her windowless room, until finally it becomes a large, deformed, and savage entrance-exit and ends with the old pimp who runs the brothel and the other whores and the horrified customers and then goes out to the patio and goes into the desert (walking or flying, Pereda does not clarify) until the air swallows her up. I never saw Soto during the time we were both in Paris. At that time, I wasn't in the mood to meet up with old friends. Besides, I'd heard that Soto's financial situation was improving; he'd married a French woman, then It was then that he received the invitation to attend a colloquium on Literature He also attempted to

translate Sophie Podolski, the young Belgian poet who committed suicide at twenty-one (he couldn't), Pierre Guyotat, the author of * Eden, Eden, Eden* and *Prostitution * (he couldn't either), and Georges Perec's *La Disparition* , a detective novel written without the letter "e" that Soto tried (and only partially succeeded) to translate into Spanish, applying what Jardiel Poncela had done half a century earlier in a story where the familiar vowel was conspicuously absent. But writing without the letter "ey" is one thing, translating without it is quite another . He published in poetry magazines in Mexico, Argentina, and Chile; I think he even appeared in one. I learned from a friend that he was teaching literature at the university, which provided him with financial stability and time for reading and research, and that he

already had two children, a boy and a girl. He harbored no hope of returning to Chile. He was, I supposed, a happy man, reasonably happy. It was easy for me to imagine him in a comfortable Paris apartment or perhaps in a house in one of the surrounding villages, reading in the silence of his soundproof study while the children watched television and his wife cooked or ironed—because someone had to cook, right?—or perhaps, better yet, the ironing was done by a maid, a Portuguese or African employee, and Soto could thus read in his soundproof study or perhaps write, although he was never one to write much, without remorse. They would see that night. increasingly disgusting or increasingly endearing, I don't really know, I live in the same boarding house - I do (or let myself be done) more or less the

same as Soto does. According to Bibiano (who maintained a fairly regular correspondence with him), it wasn't that Soto had become bourgeois, but that he had always been that way. Dealing with books, Bibiano said, requires a certain sedentary lifestyle, a certain degree of necessary bourgeois refinement, and if you don't believe me, look at me, Bibiano would say, who on a different scale—I work in a shoe shop, DISTANT STAR 37 Machine Translated by Google 38 ROBERTO BOLAÑO He wasn't in the bar for more than ten minutes. An employee saw him strolling along the platforms, slowly but with a firm and confident stride. He was by no means drunk. It's assumed he got lost in those open passageways Dalí spoke of. It's assumed that's precisely what he wanted. To get lost for an hour in the sovereign

magnificence of the Perpignan station. To follow the itinerary (mathematical, astronomical, mythical?) that More in Alicante. The reasons for the delay are unknown. On Monday morning, he bought a train ticket to Perpignan. The journey was uneventful. Upon arrival at Perpignan station, he inquired about the evening trains to Paris and bought a ticket for the 1:00 a.m. departure. He spent the rest of the afternoon strolling through the city, going into bars, visiting a secondhand bookstore where he bought a book by Guerau de Carrera, a Franco-Catalan avant-garde poet who died during the Second World War. However, he spent his free time reading a paperback detective novel he had bought that same morning in Alicante (perhaps by Vázquez Montalbán or Juan Madrid?), which

he never finished. A folded page indicated he was on page 155, even though during the AlicantePerpignan journey he had devoured it with the voracity of a teenager. week, but Soto, instead of returning to Paris on Sunday night, stayed one night and Criticism in Latin America, which took place in Alicante. It was winter. Soto hated flying; he had only flown once in his life, during the trip that took him from Santiago to Berlin at the end of 1973. So he traveled by train and after one night arrived in Alicante. The colloquium lasted two days, a weekend of In Perpignan, he ate at a pizzeria. It's unusual that he didn't go to a good restaurant and try the renowned cuisine of Roussillon, but the fact is, he ate at a pizzeria. The coroner's report is explicit and leaves no room for doubt. Soto ate a green salad, a generous plate of

cannelloni, an enormous (and I mean enormous) serving of chocolate, strawberry, vanilla, and banana ice cream, and two cups of black coffee. He also drank a bottle of Italian red wine (perhaps an inappropriate wine for cannelloni, but I don't know anything about wine). During dinner, he read the detective novel while simultaneously reading Le Monde. He left the pizzeria around ten o'clock at night. According to several accounts, he appeared at the station around midnight. He had an hour before his train departed. He had a coffee at the station bar. He was carrying his travel bag and in his other hand, Carrera's book, the detective novel, and a copy of Le Monde. According to the waiter who served him the coffee, he was sober. Dalí dreamed he was hiding without actually hiding within the confines of the

station. In reality, like a tourist. Like the tourist Soto had always been since leaving Concepción. A Latin American tourist, perplexed and desperate in equal measure (Gómez Carrillo is our Virgil), but a tourist nonetheless. What happened next is vague. Soto gets lost, either near the cathedral or the large antenna that is the Perpignan train station. The time of day and the cold—it's winter—mean the station is almost empty despite the proximity of the 1:00 a.m. train to Paris. Most people are in the bar or the main waiting room. Soto, somehow, perhaps drawn by voices, arrives at a secluded room. There he discovers three young neo-Nazis and a bundle on the floor. The young men are kicking the bundle with practiced intent. Soto remains frozen in the doorway until he notices the bundle moving, a hand, an incredibly filthy

arm, emerging from the rags. The vagrant—for she is a woman— Machine Translated by Google 39 DISTANT STAR He grew up in Pinochet's Chile, which made any disadvantageous situation seem desperate, but that wasn't all, as he soon discovered he was gay, which He shouts, "Don't hit me anymore!" Absolutely no one hears the cry, only the Chilean writer. Perhaps Soto's eyes fill with tears, tears of self-pity, for he senses he has met his fate. Between Tel Quel and Oulipo, life has decided and chosen the page of crime. In any case, he drops his travel bag and books on the threshold and walks toward the young men. Before engaging in combat, he insults them in Spanish. At first I was annoyed at not receiving more letters from Bibiano, but then, having Given all those circumstances, it wasn't surprising

that Lorenzo became an artist. (What else could he be?) But it's difficult to be an artist in the Third World if you're poor, have no arms, and are gay. So, for a while, Lorenzo dedicated himself to other things. It made the desperate situation inconceivable and unspeakable. They were terrible, and one day—a day marked with a white stone—he decided to commit suicide. One afternoon Years later I learned a story I would have liked to tell Bibiano, although by then I no longer knew where to write to him. It's Petra's story, and in a way, it's to Soto what the story of Juan Stein's doppelganger is to our Juan Stein. Petra's story should be told like a fairy tale: Once upon a time, there was a poor boy in Chile... The boy's name was Lorenzo, I think, I'm not sure, and I've forgotten his last name, but more than one person will

remember it. He liked to play and climb trees and high-voltage power poles. One day he climbed one of these poles and received such a strong electric shock that he lost both arms. They had to be amputated almost to the shoulders. So Lorenzo grew up in Chile without arms, which in itself made his situation quite disadvantageous, but on top of that... The news appeared in the Catalan newspapers, a very brief article, but I The hostile Spanish of southern Chile. The young men stab Soto and then flee. He said that I rarely answered him, which seemed normal to me, and I didn't hold a grudge. I found out through a letter from Bibiano, very long, almost like a detective's report, the last one I received from him. He studied and learned. He sang in the streets. And he fell in love, for he was an incorrigible

romantic. His disappointments (not to mention humiliations, scorn, and being ignored) That particularly bleak summer, as the sun dipped below the Pacific Ocean, Lorenzo leaped into the sea from a rock used almost exclusively by suicides (a ubiquitous feature of every self-respecting stretch of the Chilean coast). He sank like a stone, his eyes wide open, watching the water grow ever darker and bubbles rise from his lips. Then, with an involuntary movement of his legs, he surfaced. The waves obscured the beach, revealing only the rocks and, in the distance, the masts of pleasure or fishing boats. Then he sank again. This time, too, he didn't close his eyes: he moved his head calmly (the calm of someone under anesthesia) and searched with his gaze for something, anything, as long as it was beautiful, to hold onto in that

final moment. But the darkness veiled everything. an object that descended with him into the depths, and he saw nothing. His life then, just as the legend teaches, paraded before his eyes like a film. Some pieces were in black and white, and others in color. The love of his poor mother, the pride of his poor mother, the weariness of his poor mother embracing him at night when everything in the poor neighborhoods of Chile seems to hang by a thread (in black and white), the tremors, the nights he wet the bed, the hospitals, the stares, the zoo of stares (in color), the friends who share what little they have, the music that we Machine Translated by Google From then on he began to paint (with his mouth and with his feet), he began to Perfect love, brief as a Góngora sonnet, the fatal certainty (but

furious within) The fatal realization that you only live once. With sudden courage, he decided he wasn't going to die. She started dancing, writing poems and love letters, and playing instruments. He says he said it was now or never and resurfaced. The ascent seemed endless; staying afloat, almost unbearable, but he managed it. That afternoon he learned to swim without arms, like an eel or a snake. Killing oneself, he said, in this sociopolitical climate, is absurd and redundant. Better to become a secret poet. (submitted), earned a living as a street musician and dancer in cities in Holland (which he adored) and in Germany and Italy. He lived in boarding houses, in the parts of the city where North African, Turkish, or African immigrants lived, sometimes happily staying in the homes of lovers whom he would end up

abandoning, or vice versa, and after each day of street work, after drinks in gay bars or uninterrupted screenings at film archives, Lorenzo (or Lorenza, as he also liked to be called) would shut himself away in his He was in his fourth bedroom and spent his time painting or writing. During many periods of his life he lived alone. How he cleaned his ass after pooping, how he paid at the fruit stand, how he saved his money, how he cooked. How, for God's sake, he could live alone. Lorenzo answered all the questions, and the answer, almost always, was ingenuity. With ingenuity, one could manage to do anything. If Blaise Cendrars, for example, could beat anyone in a boxing match with just one arm, how could he not be able to clean—and very well—his ass after taking a dump? Science fiction, robotics, the feeling of being a

cyborg that he had when he walked with the prosthetics on. Seen from afar, for example, walking towards a friend against a violet horizon, it seemed as if he had real arms. But he took them off when he was working on the street, and his lovers, those who didn't know they were prosthetics, would immediately tell him that he didn't have arms. Some even liked him better that way, without arms. It consoles, marijuana, beauty revealed in unlikely places (in black and white), the composing songs (a photo shows him playing the piano with his toes; the artist looks at the camera and smiles), he began to save money to leave Chile. Shortly before the great Barcelona Olympics, a Catalan actor or actress, or a group of Catalan actors traveling through Germany, saw him perform in the street, perhaps in a small theater, and told

the person in charge of finding someone to play Petra, the character of Marshal and mascot, or perhaps more accurately, emblem of the events. Paralympic Games that were held immediately afterward. They say that when Mariscal saw him squeezed into Petra's costume, performing leg feats like a schizophrenic Bolshoi dancer, he said: "She's the Petra of my dreams." (They say Mariscal is that succinct.) Later, when they spoke, a fascinated Mariscal offered Lorenzo his studio so he could come to Barcelona to paint, to write, to do whatever he wanted. (They say he's that generous.) In reality, Lorenzo or Lorenza didn't need Mariscal's studio to be In Germany, a curious but often unsettling land, he bought some prosthetic arms. They looked like real arms, and he liked them mostly for the feeling of Some

referred to him as the hermit acrobat. Friends would ask him how he did it. It was difficult, but in the end he was able to leave. Life in Europe, of course, wasn't much easier. For a time, years perhaps (although Lorenzo, younger than me and Bibiano and much younger than Soto and Stein, left Chile when the avalanche of exile had already begun). ROBERTO BOLAÑO 40 Machine Translated by Google 41 DISTANT STAR Sometimes I think Lorenzo was a better poet than Stein and Soto. But usually when I think of them, I see them together. One day he became a press favorite, interviews poured in, it seemed Petra was eclipsing even Coby himself. At that time I was hospitalized in the Vall d'Hebron Hospital in Barcelona with a severely damaged liver, and I learned about his triumphs, his

jokes, his anecdotes by reading two or three newspapers daily. happier than he was during the Paralympic Games. From the first Sometimes, reading his interviews, I would burst out laughing. Other times I would start crying. Sometimes, when I think of Stein and Soto, I can't help but think of Lorenzo too. Three years later I learned that he had died of AIDS. The person who told me didn't know if it was in Germany or South America (they didn't know he was Chilean). I also saw him on television. He played his part very well. Psychiatrist, fugitive from Nazi Germany, and wanderer across three continents. In Spain, as far as I know, it hasn't been translated. Although the only thing that united them was the circumstance of being born in Chile. And a book that Stein perhaps read, that Soto certainly read (he speaks of it in a long article

about exile and wandering published in Mexico), and that Lorenzo also read, enthusiastically as he almost always did when he read something (how did he turn the pages?: with his tongue, as we all should!). The book is titled Ma gestalt-thérapie and its author is Dr. Frederick Perls. Machine Translated by Google 42 6 ROBERTO BOLAÑO The invitations to the party in Providencia were, of course, restricted and selective: a few pilots, a few young military officers (the oldest was not yet a commander) who were cultured, or at least suspected of being so, a trio of journalists, two visual artists, and an old right-wing poet who had once been an avant-garde figure and who, after the friends where he met (or was introduced to; there was always something forced about it) the sisters, cousins, and friends who were amazed by his bearing and

how polite and seemingly shy he was, but also by his coldness, by the distance that could be discerned in his eyes, or as Pía Valle said: as if behind his eyes he had another pair of eyes. At night, finally free, he dedicated himself to preparing on his own, in the Wieder was delighted to attend. In Santiago, he stayed in Providencia, in the apartment of a classmate, and during the day he would train at the Capitán Lindstrom airfield and socialize in military clubs or visit the homes of his friends' parents. But let's go back to the beginning, let's go back to Carlos Wieder and the year of grace of 1974. At that time, Wieder was at the height of his career. After his triumphs in Antarctica and in the skies over so many Chilean cities, he was called upon to do something significant in the capital, something spectacular

that would demonstrate to the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not, by any means, incompatible. apartment, on the walls of the guest room, an exhibition of photographs whose opening he made coincide with his aerial poetry exhibition. The apartment owner would later declare that until the very last moment He didn't see the photographs Wieder planned to exhibit. His first reaction to Wieder's project was, naturally, to offer him the living room, the entire house, to display the photos, but Wieder rejected the offer. He argued that the photos needed a limited and precise setting, like the author's bedroom. He said that after the writing in the sky, it was fitting—and also charmingly paradoxical—that the epilogue to aerial poetry should be confined to the poet's lair.

Regarding the nature of the photos, the apartment owner said that Wieder intended them to be a surprise and only revealed that they were visual poetry, experimental, quintessential, pure art, something that would amuse everyone. He also made him promise that neither he nor anyone else would enter his room until the opening night. The apartment owner told him that if he wanted, he could look in a closet for the key to that room for added security. Wieder said it wasn't necessary, that the officer's word was enough. The owner of the apartment solemnly gave him his word of honor. Machine Translated by Google seated in the makeshift stands of the Captain Lindstrom, scrutinizing a sky that only Hope, more admiration than hope, a few preliminary maneuvers. It performed a low pass, a loop, an

inverted roll. But no smoke. The Army men and their wives were happy, although some high-ranking Air Force officers wondered what was really happening. Then the plane gained altitude and disappeared into the belly of an immense gray cloud that drifted slowly over the city as if guiding the clouds. For some time the spectators of the air show awaited his thunderous reappearance. Death is growth. When he sighted the airfield he wrote: Death is communion, but It was going to bring them rain, not poetry. Others, the majority, took advantage of the interlude to get up from their seats, loosen their old bones, stretch their legs, and greet people. The younger ones, the most enthusiastic, busied themselves discussing the latest raids and the latest romances. Even Wieder's die-hard fans, instead of

silently awaiting the plane's reappearance or interpreting that ominous empty sky in a hundred different ways, became embroiled in practical comments about daily life that were only very tangentially touched upon. They pertained to Chilean poetry, to Chilean art. The first verse: Death is friendship. Then he hovered over some railway warehouses and what looked like abandoned factories, although among the streets he could make out people dragging cardboard boxes, children climbing on fences, dogs. To the left, at 9 o'clock, he recognized two immense shantytowns separated by the railway line. He wrote the second verse: Death is Chile. Then he turned at 3 o'clock and headed toward the center. Soon the avenues appeared, the network of swords or serpents of muted colors, the royal

river, the zoo, the buildings that were the poor man's pride of Santiago's inhabitants. The aerial view of a city, Wieder himself noted somewhere, is like a torn photograph whose fragments, contrary to what is believed, tend to separate: a disjointed mask. black from the storm. It all started badly. The day of the air show dawned with large, thick, black clouds descending southward down the valley. Some officers advised him against flying. Wieder ignored the ominous warnings and, it is said, argued with someone in a dark corner of a hangar. Afterward, his plane took off, and the spectators saw, with more The coup d'état seemed to have recovered the impetus of its youth, some young and distinguished lady (as far as is known, only one woman attended the exhibition , Tatiana von Beck

Iraola) and the father of Carlos Wieder, who lived in Viña del Mar and whose health was delicate. Wieder traveled through the interior of the cloud like Jonah through the interior of the whale. A few felt uncomfortable, as if the pilot had deliberately placed them there. mobile mask. On the coin, he wrote the third verse: Death is responsibility. to participate in small groups that formed and quickly dissolved, always leaving someone speechless, where they discussed recent rumors, new positions and appointments, and the most pressing problems facing the country. The most Wieder left the airfield far away, in a peripheral neighborhood of Santiago. There he wrote Some pedestrians saw him, a dark beetle silhouetted against a dark and threatening sky. Very few deciphered his words: the wind

scattered them in mere seconds. At some point, someone tried to contact him by radio. Wieder didn't answer.

On the horizon, at 11:00, he saw the silhouettes of two helicopters heading toward him. He circled until they drew near, then lost sight of them in an instant. On the way back to the airfield, he wrote the fourth and fifth verses: Death is love and The Carlos Wieder, meanwhile, was still up in the sky battling the elements. They ended in disasters. Most, he said, are just individual or family disasters, but None of the generals, generals' wives, generals' children, high-ranking officers, or military, civil, ecclesiastical, and cultural authorities were able to read his words. In heaven... A thunderstorm was brewing. From the control tower, a colonel asked

him to hurry and land. Wieder said "understood" and climbed again. For a moment, those on the ground thought he was going to fly into a cloud again. A captain, who wasn't in the VIP box, commented that in Chile all poetic acts Only a handful of friends and two journalists who wrote surrealist poems in their spare time (or superrealist poems, as they used to say, using a rather idiotic Spanish expression) followed from the rain-shimmering runway, in a scene that seemed to have been taken from A cocktail party was improvised at that hour, and with the downpour, everyone was hungry and thirsty. The canapés were gone in less than fifteen minutes. The waiters, recruits from the Quartermaster Corps, went back and forth with astonishing speed and a diligence that aroused envy in some of the ladies. A few officers

commented on how strange that poetpilot was, but most of the guests were talking and concerned about matters of national (and even international) importance. Some end up as national disasters. Then, at the other end of Santiago, but perfectly visible from the stands set up at the Capitán Lindstrom stadium, the first lightning bolt struck, and Carlos Wieder wrote: " Death is cleansing." But he wrote it so badly, the weather conditions were so unfavorable, that very few of the spectators, who were already beginning to rise from their seats and open the first umbrellas, understood what he had written. Black shreds remained across the sky, cuneiform writing, hieroglyphics, a child's scribbles. Although some did understand and thought Carlos Wieder had gone mad. It began to rain, and the

exodus was general. In one of the hangars, there had been He wrote, or thought he was writing: Death is my heart. And then: Take my heart. And then his name: Carlos Wieder, without fear of rain or lightning. Without fearing, above all, inconsistency. And then I no longer had smoke to write with (for a while now the smoke escaping from the fuselage gave the impression, more than of writing, of a fire, a fire that (it melted into the rain) but he wrote: Death is resurrection and the faithful who remained below understood nothing but they understood that Wieder was writing something, they understood or thought they understood the pilot's will and they knew that even if they understood nothing they were witnessing a unique act, an important event for the art of the future. Afterwards Carlos Wieder

landed without any problem (those who saw him say he was sweating as if he had just come out of a sauna), he received a reprimand from the control tower officer and from some high-ranking officers who were still wandering among the remains of the cocktail party and after drinking, standing up, a beer (he didn't speak to anyone, he answered the questions asked of him with monosyllables), he went to the Providencia apartment to prepare the second act of his Santiago gala. All of the above may have happened that way. Perhaps not. Maybe the Chilean Air Force generals didn't bring their wives. Maybe at the Capitán Lindstrom airfield From a World War II film, the maneuvers of the small plane beneath the storm. As for Wieder, perhaps he didn't realize that his audience had become so small.

And where Wieder slept and on whose walls he planned to exhibit the photos for the judgment of his An aerial poetry recital would never have been staged. Perhaps Wieder wrote his poem The following explains. They had known each other since adolescence and it had been a while since they'd last seen one. By eleven o'clock there were about twenty people, all reasonably drunk. No one had yet entered the guest room. Finally, at the stroke of midnight, he stood on a chair in the middle of the living room, asking for silence, and said (according to Muñoz Cano) that it was time to immerse himself in the new art. Once again, he was the same old Wieder: commanding, confident, his eyes seemingly detached from his body, as if gazing from another planet. Then he made his way to his

bedroom door and let his guests in one by one. One by one, gentlemen, Chilean art doesn't tolerate crowds. As he said this (according to Muñoz Cano), Wieder adopted a playful tone and looked at his father, winking with his left eye and then his right. As if he were twelve years old again, giving him a secret signal. His father wore a serene expression and smiled at his son. independent, who always did what she wanted, went out with whomever she pleased, and had friends. Lieutenant Julio César Muñoz Cano, who years later would publish the book With a Noose Around His Neck, a kind of autobiographical and self-flagellating narrative about his actions in the early years of the coup government, writes that Carlos Wieder behaved as The room was lit in the usual way. Not a single extra lamp, not a The photographic

exhibition in the department, however, took place exactly as planned. a window) that still recall the words in the sky and later the purifying rain. But perhaps it all happened differently. Hallucinations were not uncommon in 1974. in the sky of Santiago without asking anyone's permission, without warning anyone, although this is less likely. Perhaps it didn't even rain on Santiago that day, although there are witnesses (idle people looking up while sitting on a park bench, solitary people peering out The first guests arrived at nine o'clock at night. Most of them were friends. usual (sometimes tiresome, sometimes downright tasteless) behavior at these kinds of gatherings. Every now and then she would disappear, locking herself in her room (and this time the room was indeed locked), but her

absences never lasted long. In a normal manner (or perhaps abnormal: he was much calmer than usual, even humble, with a face that looked permanently freshly washed), he attended to the guests as if the house were his own (the camaraderie was total, too good, too ideal, writes Muñoz Cano), he greeted with affection the classmates he hadn't seen for a long time, he condescended to comment on the incidents of that morning at the airfield without giving them or himself much importance, he willingly endured the jokes The first to enter was Tatiana von Beck Iraola, as was to be expected given her gender and her impulsive and capricious nature. Tatiana, writes Muñoz Cano, was the granddaughter, daughter, and sister of military men, and in her somewhat eccentric way, a woman

Outlandish, often contradictory, but frequently original opinions. Years later she married a pediatrician, they moved to La Serena, and she had six children. The Tatiana of that night, Muñoz Cano recalls with a melancholy slightly tinged with horror, was a beautiful and trusting young woman who entered the room hoping to find heroic portraits or boring photographs of the Chilean skies.

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Not a minute had passed when Tatiana von Beck reappeared. She was pale and distraught. Everyone saw her. She glanced at Wieder—as if she were about to say something but couldn't find the words—and

then tried to reach the bathroom. She couldn't. She vomited in the hallway and then, stumbling, left the apartment, helped by an officer who gallantly offered to escort her home despite von Beck's protests that she preferred to go alone. Outside, the party continued. The young people drank like young people and like winners, and they could hold their liquor like true Chileans. The laughter was contagious, Muñoz Cano recalls, oblivious to any threat, any shadow. Somewhere, a trio began to sing, arm in arm, accompanied by one of their guitarists. Leaning against the walls, in groups of two or three, some talked about the future or about love. Everyone was happy to be there, at the poet-pilot's party; they were happy to be who they were. An extra spotlight was needed to enhance the photos. The room

shouldn't resemble an art gallery, but rather a room, a borrowed space, a young man's temporary quarters. Of course, there were no colored lights, as someone suggested, nor drum music emanating from a boombox hidden under the bed. The atmosphere had to be casual, normal, and understated. They were also friends of Carlos Wieder, even if they didn't fully understand him, even if they noticed the difference between them and him. In the hallway, the line was constantly thinning; some ran out of alcohol and went for more, others got caught up in reaffirmations of friendship and eternal loyalty that carried them, like a protective wave, back to the lounge, from where they returned, dizzy, with flushed cheeks, to reclaim their place in the line. The smoke, especially in the hallway, was considerable. Wieder

remained standing in the doorway. Two lieutenants were arguing and pushing each other (but gently) in They stood firm in line. Muñoz Cano, by his own admission, paced back and forth, nervous and filled with dark premonitions. The two surrealist (or superrealist) reporters were conversing with the homeowner. In one of his comings and goings, Muñoz Cano managed to overhear some Words: they talked about travel, the Mediterranean, Miami, warm beaches, fishing boats, exuberant women. The bathroom was at the end of the hall. Wieder's father was one of the few who were serious and Wieder's father broke the spell. He made his way politely, calling the officers ahead of him in line by their first names, and entered the room. The second to enter was a captain who had been Wieder's teacher at the Academy.

He never came out again. Wieder, standing by the closed door (the captain had left it ajar upon entering, but Wieder closed it again), smiled with increasing satisfaction. In the living room, some wondered what had gotten into Tatiana. "She's drunk, then," said a voice Muñoz Cano didn't recognize. Someone put on a Pink Floyd record. Someone remarked that men couldn't dance together; "This feels like a pigsty," said another voice. They replied that Pink Floyd's music was for listening, not dancing. The surreal reporters whispered among themselves. A lieutenant suggested they go out to a brothel immediately. Muñoz Cano writes that at that moment he had the feeling they were out in the open, in the dark night, in the middle of nowhere—at least, that's how the voices sounded. In the

hallway, the atmosphere was even worse. Hardly anyone spoke, like in a dentist's waiting room. "But where have you ever seen a dentist's waiting room where rotten teeth are standing up?" asks Muñoz Cano. Machine Translated by Google 47 DISTANT STAR cement. The surreal reporters made gestures of displeasure but kept their composure. According to Muñoz Cano, he recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most were women. The setting of the photos hardly varied from one to another, leading him to deduce it was the same place. The women look like mannequins, in some cases dismembered, mangled mannequins, although Muñoz Cano doesn't rule out the possibility that in thirty percent of the cases they were alive when the photographs were taken.

The photos, in general (according to Muñoz Cano), are of poor quality, although the impression that There, sitting on the bed, they found the captain. He was smoking and reading some notes. The apartment owner followed him. Almost immediately, he came back out and confronted Wieder; for a moment it seemed he was going to hit him, he had him by the lapels, and then he turned his back and went to the living room to get a drink. From that moment on, everyone, including Muñoz Cano, wanted to go into the bedroom. typed notes he had previously torn from a wall. He seemed calm, although cigarette ash was spreading across one of his legs. Wieder's father Casual: they follow a line, an argument, a story (chronological, spiritual...), a plan. Those stuck to the ceiling are similar (according to Muñoz Cano)

to hell, but an empty hell. Those stuck (with thumbtacks) in the four corners resemble an epiphany. An epiphany of madness. In other groups of photos, an elegiac tone predominates (but how can there be nostalgia and melancholy in these photos?, Muñoz Cano wonders). The symbols are few but eloquent. The photo of the cover of a book by François-Xavier de Maistre (Joseph de Maistre's younger brother): Evenings in Saint Petersburg. The photo of a photo of a young blonde woman who seems to vanish into thin air. The photo of a severed finger, lying on the gray, porous floor of The effect they have on those who contemplate them is very vivid. The order in which they are displayed is not While looking at some of the hundreds of photos that decorated the walls and part of the ceiling of the room, a cadet, whose

presence there no one could explain, perhaps the younger brother of one of the officers, started to cry and curse and had to be dragged out. After the initial crash, suddenly everyone fell silent. It seemed as if a current Given the homeowner's passivity, Muñoz Cano answered the call himself. An old man's voice asked for someone named Lucho Álvarez. "Hello? Hello? Is Lucho Álvarez there, please?" Muñoz Cano, without answering, handed the phone to the homeowner. "Does anyone know a Lucho Álvarez?" the homeowner asked after an excessively long pause. The old man, Muñoz deduced Cano was probably talking about other things, asking other questions, perhaps related to Lucho Álvarez. Nobody knew him. Some people laughed; nervous laughter that sounded unreasonably loud. "That person doesn't live

here," the homeowner said after... There was nobody left in the photo room except Wieder and the captain, and in the "A high-voltage shock would have ripped through the house, leaving us speechless," Muñoz Cano says in one of the few lucid moments in his book. "We looked at each other and recognized each other, but in reality, it was as if we didn't recognize each other at all. We seemed different, we seemed the same. We hated our own faces; our gestures were those of sleepwalkers or idiots. While some left without saying goodbye, a strange feeling of camaraderie lingered among those who chose to stay." As a curious aside, Muñoz Cano adds that at that particularly delicate moment, the telephone began to ring. He listened in silence for a while longer and hung up.

In (part of the pair of reporters), but as the minutes passed without anything happening and faced with their silence, completely absorbed in their work, the partygoers stopped paying attention to them, as if they were cleaning staff arriving at an ungodly hour. For what seemed an eternity to everyone, the Intelligence agents and the captain were locked in the room with Wieder (one of Wieder's friends wanted to come in to "offer moral support," but the plainclothes man told him not to be an idiot and to let them work in peace); afterwards, through the closed door, they heard curses, the word "fool" repeated several times Afterward, Wieder left the room and spoke with his father in the kitchen, unobstructed. But it was no more than five minutes. When they came out, they were both carrying glasses. A teenager tried

not to look at him. The other survivors of the party talked or whispered among themselves but fell silent when he approached. An awkward silence that Wieder's father tried to break by offering drinks, hot beverages, and sandwiches he prepared in the kitchen, alone and calm. "Don't worry, Don José," said one of the officers, looking at the floor. "I'm not worried, Javierito," said Wieder's father. "This is nothing more than a minor setback in Carlos's career," said another. Wieder's father looked at him as if he didn't According to Muñoz Cano, no more than eight people remained in the apartment, among them Wieder's father, who didn't seem particularly affected (his demeanor suggested he was participating— perhaps involuntarily —in a cadet party that, for some reason beyond his understanding or

concern, had been ruined). The owner of the house, whom he had known since he was He understood what he was talking about. He was kind to us, Muñoz Cano recalls; he was on the edge of the abyss and didn't know it, or didn't care, or concealed it with a rare perfection. alcohol on their hands. The captain also went out for a drink and then went back into the photo room with a warning that no one else should enter. One of the lieutenants, at the captain's direction, made a list of the names of everyone who had attended the party. Someone remembered an oath, another started talking about Discretion and the honor of gentlemen. The honor of chivalry, said one who until that moment seemed asleep. And there were those who felt offended and protested that it wasn't the soldiers who should be doubted but the

civilians, alluding to the pair of surrealist reporters. These gentlemen, replied the captain, know what's good for them. The surrealists hastened to agree with him and affirm that there, deep down, nothing had happened, among worldly people, you know how it is. Later, someone made coffee, and much later, but when it was still quite early, three soldiers and a civilian appeared and identified themselves as intelligence personnel. Those who were in the Providencia apartment let them in, thinking they were going to arrest Wieder. At first The arrival of the intelligence agents was met with respect and a certain amount of fear (especially by times and then only silence. Later, the Intelligence agents left as quietly as they had arrived, with three shoeboxes, provided by the apartment owner,

filled with photos from the exhibition. She left the room and crossed the living room without looking at anyone until she reached the window. She drew back the curtains (outside it was still dark, but in the distance, towards the mountain range, "Well, gentlemen," said the captain before following them, "the best thing would be for you to get some sleep and forget everything that happened tonight." A couple of lieutenants snapped to attention, but the rest were too tired to follow any kind of regulations or rituals and didn't even say goodnight (or good morning, since it was already dawn). Just as the captain was leaving, slamming the door—a humorous detail that none of them appreciated—Wieder Machine Translated by Google 49 DISTANT STAR The living room, Muñoz Cano recalls, resembled a

hospital waiting room. “Are you under arrest?” the apartment owner finally asked.